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LN THE
DEAD OF NIGHT

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ON.

IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT.

A Novel.



IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON.
1874.

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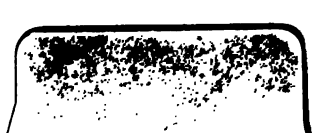
IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT.

CHAPTER I.

A WAY OUT OF THE DIFFICULTY.

TWO hours after the receipt of Mrs. McDermott's second letter, Squire Culpepper was on his way to Sugden's bank. His heart was heavy, and his step slow. He had never had to borrow a farthing from any man—at least, never since he had come into the estate—and he felt the humiliation, as he himself called it, very bitterly. There was something of bitterness, too, in having to confess to his friend Cope how all his brilliant castles in the air had vanished utterly, leaving not a wrack behind.

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The two men met with a certain amount ot restraint on either side. They shook hands as a matter of course, and made a few remarks about the weather; and then the banker began to play with his seals, and waited in bland silence to hear whatever the Squire might have to say to him.

Mr. Culpepper fidgeted in his chair and cleared his throat. The crucial moment was come at last. "I'm in a bit of a difficulty, Cope," he began, "and I've come to you, as one of the oldest friends I have, to see whether you can help me out of it."

"I should have thought that Mr. Culpepper was one of the last people in the world to be troubled with difficulties of any kind," said the banker, in a tone of studied coldness.

"Which shows how little you know about either Mr. Culpepper or his affairs," said the Squire, dryly.

The banker coughed dubiously. "In what way can I be of service to you?" he said.

"I want five thousand five hundred pounds

by this day week, and I've come to you to help me to raise it."

"In other words, you want to borrow five thousand five hundred pounds?"

"Exactly so."

"And what kind of security are you prepared to offer for a loan of such magnitude?"

"What security! Why, my I.O.U., of course."

Mr. Cope took a pinch of snuff slowly and deliberately before he spoke again. "I am afraid the document in question could hardly be looked upon as a negotiable security."

"And who the deuce wanted it to be considered as a negotiable security?" burst out the Squire. "Do you think I want everybody to know my private affairs?"

"Possibly not," said the banker, quietly. "But, in transactions of this nature, it is a matter of simple business that the person who advances the money should have some equivalent security in return."

"And is not my I.O.U. a good and equivalent security as between friend and friend?"

"Oh! if you are going to put the case in that way, it becomes a different kind of transaction entirely," said the banker.

"And how else did you think I was going to put the case, as you call it?" asked the Squire, indignantly.

"Commercially, of course: as a pure matter of business between one man and another."

"Oh, ho! that's it, is it?" said the Squire, grimly.

"That's just it, Mr. Culpepper."

"Then friendship in such a case as this counts for nothing, and my I.O.U. might just as well never be written."

"Let us be candid with each other," said the banker, blandly. "You want the loan of a very considerable sum of money. Now, however much inclined I might be to lend you the amount out of my own private coffers, you will believe me when I say that I am not in a position to do so. I have no such amount of available capital in hand at present. But if you were to come to me with a good nego-

tiable security, I could at once put you into the proper channel for obtaining what you want. A mortgage, for instance. What could be better than that? The estate, so far as I know, is unencumbered, and the sum you need could easily be raised on it on very easy terms."

"I took an oath to my father on his death-bed that I would never raise a penny by mortgage on Pincote, and I never will."

"If that is the case," said the banker, with a slight shrug of the shoulders, "I am afraid that I hardly see in what way I can be of service to you." He coughed, and then he looked at his watch, an action which Mr. Culpepper did not fail to note and resent in his own mind.

"I am sorry I came," he said, bitterly. "It seems to have been only a waste of your time and mine."

"Don't speak of it," said the banker, with his little business laugh. "In any case, you have learned one of the first and simplest lessons of commercial ethics."

"I have, indeed," answered the Squire, with a sigh. He rose to go.

"And Miss Culpepper, is she quite well?" said Mr. Cope, rising also. "I have not had the pleasure of seeing her for some little time."

The Squire faced fiercely round. "Look you here, Horatio Cope," he said; "you and I have been friends of many years' standing. Fast friends, I thought, whom no reverses of fortune would have separated. Finding myself in a little strait, I come to you for assistance. To whom else should I apply? It is idle to say that you could not help me out of my difficulty, were you willing to do so."

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The Squire winced. "I am rightly served," he muttered to himself. "What can one expect from a man who swept out an office and cleaned his master's shoes?" He rose to go. For all his bitterness, there was a little pathetic feeling at work in his heart. "So ends a friendship of twenty years," was his thought. "Good-bye, Cope," he said aloud as he moved towards the door.

The banker, standing with his back to the fire, and looking straight at the opposite wall, neither stirred nor spoke, nor so much as turned his head to take a last look at his old friend. And so, without another word, the Squire passed out.

A bleak north wind was blowing as the Squire stepped into the street. He paused for a moment to button his coat more closely

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Kester's first impulse after his recovery—and a very strong impulse it was—was to quit Park Newton at once and for ever. Further reflection, however, convinced him that such a step would be unwise in the extreme. It would at once be said that he had been frightened away by the ghost, and that was a thing that he could by no means afford to have said of him. For it to get gossiped about that he had been driven from his own house by the ghost of Percy Osmond, might, in time, tend to breed suspicion; and from suspicion might spring inquiry, and that might ultimately lead to nobody knew what. No: he would stay on at Park Newton for weeks—for months even, if it suited him to do so. The incident of his sudden illness was a very untoward one: on that point there could be no doubt whatever; but not if he could anyhow help it should the faintest breath of suspicion spring therefrom.

The Squire's troubles had faded into the background for a few minutes during his interview with General St. George, but they

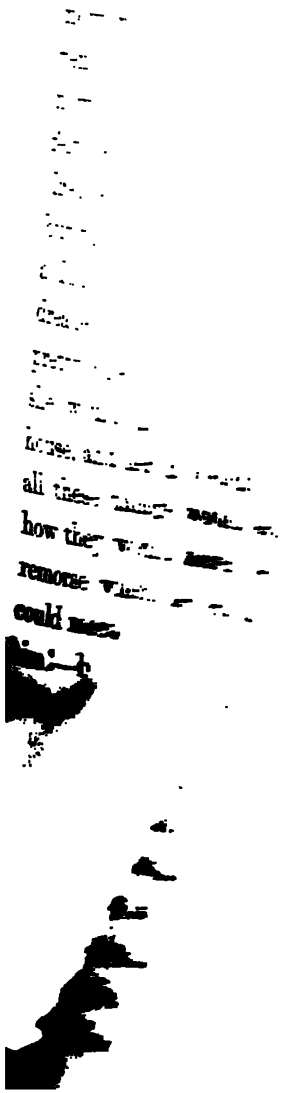
now rushed back upon him with, as it seemed, tenfold force. There was nothing left for him now but to go home, and yet he had never felt less inclined to do so in his life. He dreaded the long quiet evening, with no society but that of his daughter. Not that Jane was a dull companion, or anything like it; but he dreaded to encounter her pleading eyes, her pretty caressing ways, the lingering embrace she would give him when he entered the house, and her good-night kiss. He felt how all these things would tend to unman him, how they would merely serve to deepen the remorse which he felt already. If only he could meet with some one to take home with him!—he did not care much who it was—some one who would talk to him, and enliven the evening, and take off for a little while the edge of his trouble, and so help him to tide over the weary hours that intervened between now and the morrow, by which time something might happen—he knew not what—or some light be vouchsafed to him which would show him a way out of his difficulties.

These, or something like these, were the thoughts that were floating hazily in his mind, when in the distance he spied Tom Bristow striding along at his usual energetic rate. The Squire being still very lame, wisely captured a passing butcher boy, and, with the promise of sixpence, bade him hurry after Tom, and not come back without him.

"You must come back with me to Pincote," he said, when the astonished Tom had been duly captured. "I'll take no refusal. I've got a fit of mopes, and if you don't come and help to keep Jenny and me alive this evening, I'll never speak to you again as long as I live." So saying, the Squire linked his arm in Tom's, and turned his face towards Pincote; and nothing loath was Tom to go with him.

"I've done a fine thing this afternoon," said Mr. Culpepper, as they drove along in the basket-carriage, which had been waiting for him at the hotel. "I've broken off Jenny's engagement with Edward Cope."

Tom's heart gave a great bound. "Pardon me, sir, for saying so," he said as calmly as he



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"With all my heart," said the banker, quietly.

"For some time past your son, acting, no doubt, on instructions from his father, has been gradually paving the way for something of this kind. There have been no letters from him for five weeks, and the last three or four that he sent were not more than as many lines each. No doubt he will feel grateful at being released from an engagement that had become odious to him; and on Miss Culpepper's side the release will be an equally happy one. She had learned long ago to estimate at his true value the man to whom she had so rashly

and then walks back home. I have watched him several times."

"The Wizard's Fountain, in the Sycamore Walk! What should take him there?"

"Then you know the place, sir?"

"I know it well."

"Can't say what fancy takes him there, sir. Perhaps he doesn't know hisself."

"In any case, let me know when he next walks in his sleep. I have no further instructions for you to-night, Dobbs."

"Thank you, sir. I have the honour to wish you a very good night, sir."

"Good-night, Dobbs. Keep your eyes open, and report everything to me."

"Yes, sir, yes. You may trust me for doing that, sir." And Dobbs the obsequious bowed himself out.

In his cousin's valet Lionel had found an instrument ready to his hand, but it was not till after long hesitation and doubt that he made up his mind to avail himself of it. The necessities of the case at length decided him to do so. No one appreciated the value of a

bribe better than Dobbs, or worked harder or more conscientiously to deserve one. There was a crooked element in his character which made whatever money he might earn by indirect means, or by tortuous working, seem far sweeter to him than the honest wages of every-day life. Kester St. George was not the kind of man ever to try to attach his inferiors to himself by any tie of gratitude or kindness. At different times and in various ways he suffered for this indifference, although the present could hardly be considered as a case in point, seeing that it was not in the nature of Dobbs to resist a bribe in whatever shape it might offer itself, and that gratitude was one of those virtues which had altogether been omitted from his composition.

Late one afternoon, a few days after the interview between Lionel and Dobbs, Kester St. George had his horse brought round, and rode out unattended, and without leaving word in what direction he was going, or at what hour he might be expected back. The day was dull and lowering, with fitful puffs of

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without a doubt. But such ties as the one between her and me become tiresome in the long run. She ought to have died off long ago, but she's as tough as leather. Poor devils in this part of the country, that haven't a penny to bless themselves with, think nothing of living till they're a hundred. Is it a superfluity of ozone, or a want of brains, that keeps them alive so long?"

He rode steadily forward till he had nearly crossed one angle of the moor. At length, but not without some difficulty, he found the place he had come in search of. It was a rudely-built hut—cottage it could hardly be called—composed of mud, and turf, and great boulders all unhewn. Its roof of coarsest thatch was frayed and worn with the wind and rain of many winters. Its solitary door of old planks, roughly nailed together, opened full on to the moor.

At the back was a patch of garden-ground, which was supposed to grow potatoes in the season, but which had never yet been known to grow any that were fit to eat. Mr. St.

George looked round with a sneer as he dismounted.

"And it was in this wretched den that I spent the first eight years of my existence!" he muttered. "And the woman whom this place calls its mistress was the first being whom I learned to love! And, faith, I'm rather doubtful whether I've ever loved anybody half so well since."

Putting his horse's bridle over a convenient hook, and dispensing with the ceremony of knocking, Kester St. George lifted the latch, pushed open the door, stooped his head, and went in. Inside the hut everything was in semi-darkness, and Kester stood for a minute with the door in his hand, striving to make out the objects before him.

"Come in and shut the door: I expected you," said a hollow voice from one corner of the room; and the one room, such as it was, comprised the whole hut.

"Is that you, Mother Mim?" asked Kester.

"Ay—who else should it be?" answered

"I have, indeed," answered the Squire, with a sigh. He rose to go.

"And Miss Culpepper, is she quite well?" said Mr. Cope, rising also. "I have not had the pleasure of seeing her for some little time."

The Squire faced fiercely round. "Look you here, Horatio Cope," he said; "you and I have been friends of many years' standing. Fast friends, I thought, whom no reverses of fortune would have separated. Finding myself in a little strait, I come to you for assistance. To whom else should I apply? It is idle to say that you could not help me out of my difficulty, were you willing to do so."

"No, believe me——" interrupted the banker; but Mr. Culpepper went on without deigning to notice the interruption.

"You have not chosen to do so, and there's an end of the matter, so far. Our friendship must cease from this day. You will not be sorry that it is so. The insults and slights you have put upon me of late have all had that end in view, and you are doubtless

grateful that they have had the desired effect."

"You judge me very hardly," said the banker.

"I judge you from your own actions, and from them alone," said the Squire, sternly. "Another point, and I have done. Your son was engaged to my daughter, with your full sanction and consent. That engagement, too, must come to an end."

"With all my heart," said the banker, quietly.

"For some time past your son, acting, no doubt, on instructions from his father, has been gradually paving the way for something of this kind. There have been no letters from him for five weeks, and the last three or four that he sent were not more than as many lines each. No doubt he will feel grateful at being released from an engagement that had become odious to him; and on Miss Culpepper's side the release will be an equally happy one. She had learned long ago to estimate at his true value the man to whom she had so rashly

pledged her hand. She had found out, to her bitter cost, that she had promised herself to a person who had neither the instincts nor the education of a gentleman—to an individual, in fact, who was little better than a common boor."

This last thrust touched the banker to the quick. His face flushed deeply. He crossed the room and called down an India-rubber tube: "What is the amount of Mr. Culpepper's balance?"

Presently came the answer: "Two eighty eleven five."

"Two hundred and eighty pounds, eleven shillings, and five pence," said Mr. Cope, with a sneer. "May I ask, sir, that you will take immediate steps for having this magnificent balance transferred to some other establishment."

"I shall take my own time about doing that," said Mr. Culpepper.

"What a pity that your new mansion was not finished in time—quite a castle it was to have been, was it not? A mortgage of five

or six thousand could have been a matter of no difficulty then, you know. If I recollect rightly, all the furniture and decorations were to have come from London. Nothing in Duxley would have been good enough. I merely echo your own words."

The Squire winced. "I am rightly served," he muttered to himself. "What can one expect from a man who swept out an office and cleaned his master's shoes?" He rose to go. For all his bitterness, there was a little pathetic feeling at work in his heart. "So ends a friendship of twenty years," was his thought. "Good-bye, Cope," he said aloud as he moved towards the door.

The banker, standing with his back to the fire, and looking straight at the opposite wall, neither stirred nor spoke, nor so much as turned his head to take a last look at his old friend. And so, without another word, the Squire passed out.

A bleak north wind was blowing as the Squire stepped into the street. He paused for a moment to button his coat more closely

around him. As he did so, a poor ragged wretch passed trembling by without saying a word. The Squire called the man back and gave him a shilling. "My plight may be bad enough, but his is a thousand times worse," he said to himself as he walked down the street.

Where to go, or what to do next, he did not know. He had gone to see Mr. Cope without any very great expectation of being able to obtain what he wanted, and yet, perhaps, not without some faint hope nestling at his heart that his friend would find him the money. But now he knew for a fact that nothing was to be got from that quarter, he felt a little chilled, a little lonely, a little lost as to what he should do next. That something must be done, he knew quite well, but he was at a nonplus as to what that something ought to be. To raise five thousand five hundred pounds at a few days' notice, with no better security to offer than a simple I.O.U., was by no means an easy matter, as the Squire was beginning

to discover to his cost. "Why not ask Sir Harry Cripps?" he said to himself. But then he bethought himself that Sir Harry had a very expensive family, and that only six months ago he had given up his hunter, and dispensed with a couple of carriage-horses, and had talked of going on to the continent for four or five years. No: it was evident that Sir Harry Cripps could do nothing for him.

In what other direction to turn he knew not. "If poor Lionel Dering had only been alive, I could have gone to him with confidence," he thought. "Why not try Kester St. George?" was his next thought. "No: Kester isn't one of the lending kind," he muttered, with a shake of the head. "He's uncommonly close-fisted, is Kester. What he's got he'll stick to. No use trying there."

Next moment he nearly ran against General St. George, who was coming from an opposite direction. They started at sight of each other, then shook hands cordially. Their acquaintanceship dated only from the arrival

of the General at Park Newton, but they had already learned to like and esteem one another.

After the customary greetings and inquiries were over, said Mr. Culpepper to the General: "Is your nephew Kester still stopping with you at Park Newton?"

"Yes, he is still there," answered the General; "though he has talked every day for the last month or more about going. Kester is one of those unaccountable fellows that you can never depend on. He may stay for another month, or he may take it into his head to go by the first train to-morrow."

"I heard a little while ago that he was ill; but I suppose he is better again by this time?"

"Yes—quite recovered. He was laid up for three or four days, but he soon got all right again."

"Your other nephew — George — Tom— Harry—what's his name—is he quite well?"

"You mean Richard—he who came from India? Yes, he is quite well."

"He's very like his poor brother, only darker, and—pardon me for saying so—not half so agreeable a young fellow."

"Everybody seems to have liked poor Lionel."

"Nobody could help liking him," said the Squire, with energy. "I felt the loss of that poor boy almost as much as if he had been my own son."

"Not a soul in the world had an ill word to say about him."

"I wish that the same could be said of all of us," said the Squire. And so, after a few more words, they parted.

As General St. George had told the Squire, Kester was still at Park Newton. The doctor who was called in to attend him after his sudden attack on the night that the footsteps were heard in the nailed-up room, prescribed a bottle or two of some harmless mixture, and a few days of complete rest and isolation. As Kester would neither allow himself to be examined, nor answer any questions, there was very little more that could be done for him.

were really dead? If such were the case, it would do away with all fear of her strange secret being ever divulged to any one else. Yes—in every way her death would be a welcome release.

It was not without a tremor, it was not without a faster beating of the heart, that Kester took the bit of cracked looking-glass from the wall and held it to the woman's lips. His very life seemed to stand still for a moment or two while he waited for the result. It came. The glass clouded faintly. The woman was not dead. With a muttered curse Kester dashed the glass across the floor and put back the candle on the chimney-piece. Then he took up his hat. Where was the use of staying longer? She could tell him nothing more when she should have come to her senses than she had told him already: nothing, that is, of any consequence; and as for details, he did not want them—at least, not now. What he had been told already held food enough for thought for some time to come. He paused for a moment

now rushed back upon him with, as it seemed, tenfold force. There was nothing left for him now but to go home, and yet he had never felt less inclined to do so in his life. He dreaded the long quiet evening, with no society but that of his daughter. Not that Jane was a dull companion, or anything like it; but he dreaded to encounter her pleading eyes, her pretty caressing ways, the lingering embrace she would give him when he entered the house, and her good-night kiss. He felt how all these things would tend to unman him, how they would merely serve to deepen the remorse which he felt already. If only he could meet with some one to take home with him!—he did not care much who it was—some one who would talk to him, and enliven the evening, and take off for a little while the edge of his trouble, and so help him to tide over the weary hours that intervened between now and the morrow, by which time something might happen—he knew not what—or some light be vouchsafed to him which would show him a way out of his difficulties.

wind. Her black, glittering eyes took him in from head to foot as he walked up to her. "Go inside at once. She has fainted," said Kester. The girl nodded and went. Then Kester mounted his horse and rode slowly homeward through the chilly twilight. Bitterest thoughts held him as with a vice. When he came within sight of the chimneys of Park Newton, he gave a sigh of relief, and put spurs to his horse. "That is mine, and no power on earth shall take it from me," he muttered. "That and the money that comes with it. I am Kester St. George. Let those disprove who can!"

A few nights later, as Lionel Dering was sitting in his dressing-room, smoking a last cigar before turning in, there came three low, distinct taps at the door, which he recognized as the peculiar signal of Dobbs. It was nearly an hour past midnight, and in that early household every one had been long abed, or, at least, had retired long ago to their own rooms.

Lionel opened the door, and Dobbs slid

softly in. Such visits were by no means infrequent, but they were usually paid at a somewhat earlier hour than on the present occasion.

"Come in, Dobbs," said Lionel. "You are later to-night than usual."

"Yes, sir, I am, and I must ask you to pardon me for intruding at such an hour; but, if you remember, sir, you told me, a little while ago, that I was to let you know without fail the very next time my master took to walking in his sleep."

"Quite right, Dobbs. I am glad that you have not forgotten my instructions."

"Well, sir, Mr. St. George left his rooms, a few minutes ago, fast asleep."

"In which direction did he go?"

"He went down the side staircase, and through the conservatory, and let himself out through the little glass door into the garden."

"And then which way did he go?"

"I did not follow him any farther, but ran at once to tell you."

"Have you any idea as to what direction he would be most likely to take?"

"There is little doubt, sir, but that he has gone towards the Wizard's Fountain, in the Sycamore Walk. Three times already, that is the place to which he has gone."

"We must follow him, Dobbs."

"Yes, sir."

"We must watch him, but be careful not to disturb him."

"Yes, sir."

"I suppose there is little or no fear of his waking before he gets back to the house?"

"None whatever, sir, as far as my experience goes. As a rule, he goes quietly back to his own rooms, undresses himself as quietly and soberly as if he was wide awake, and gets into bed; and when he does really wake up in the morning, he never seems to know anything about what has happened over-night. But we must make haste, sir, if we wish to overtake him."

"I will be ready in one minute."

Lionel wrapped a warm furred cloak about

him, and put a travelling-cap on his head. Three minutes later he and Dobbs stood together in the open air.

The night was clear, crisp, and cold. The moon was just rising above the tree-tops, bathing the upper part of the quaint old house in its white glory, but as yet the shrubbery and the garden-paths lay in deepest shadow. Nowhere could they discern the figure of the man whom they had come out to follow; but the Wizard's Fountain was a good half mile from the Hall, so they struck at once into the nearest footway that led towards it. A few minutes' quick walking took them there. Lionel knew the place well. It had been a favourite haunt of his when living at Park Newton during the few happy weeks that preceded the murder. Very weird and solemn the whole place looked, as seen by moonlight at that still hour of the night.

Although known as the Sycamore Walk, there were only two trees of that particular kind growing there, and they threw their

antique shadows immediately over the fountain itself. The rest of the avenue consisted of beech, and oak, and elm. But all the trees were huge, and old, and fantastic: untended and uncared for—growing together year after year, whispering their leafy secrets to each other with every spring that came round, and standing shoulder to shoulder against the winds of winter: a hoary brotherhood of forest sages.

The fountain itself, whatever it might have been in years long gone by, was now nothing more than a confused heap of huge stones, overgrown with lichens and creepers. From the midst of them, and from what had doubtless at one time been a representation in marble of the head of a leopard or other forest animal, but which now was almost worn past recognition, trickled a thin stream of coldest water; which, falling into a broken basin below, overbrimmed itself there, and was lost among the cracks and interstices in the masses of broken masonry that lay scattered around.

"You had better, perhaps, wait here," said

Lionel to Dobbs, as they halted for a moment at the entrance to the avenue.

Dobbs did as he was bidden, and Lionel advanced alone, keeping well within the shade of the trees. When within a dozen yards of the fountain, he halted and waited. The low, ceaseless monotone of the falling water was the only sound that broke the moonlit silence.

From out the dense shadow of the trees on the opposite side of the avenue, and as if he himself were part of that shadow, Kester St. George slowly emerged. In the middle of the avenue, and in the full light of the moon, he paused. His right hand was thrust into the bosom of his vest, as if he were hiding something there. Standing thus, he seemed, as it were, to shrink within himself. Still hugging that hidden something, he seemed to listen—to listen as if his very life depended on the act. Then, with a slow, creeping motion, as though his feet were weighted with lead, he stole towards the fountain. He reached it. He grasped the stonework with one hand, and then he tu

to gaze, as though in dread of some hidden pursuer. Then slowly, almost reluctantly, he seemed to draw something from within his vest, and, while stlll gazing furtively around him, he thrust his arm, elbow deep, into a crevice in the masonry, let it rest there for a single moment, and then withdrew it. With the same furtively restless look, and ears that seemed to listen more intently than ever, he paused for an instant. Then he stole swiftly back across the moonlit avenue, and so vanished among the black shadows from whence he had come.

So natural had been his actions, so unstudied his every movement, that it seemed impossible to believe that he was indeed asleep.

Hardly had Kester St. George disappeared before Lionel Dering was by the fountain, on the very spot where his cousin had stood half a minute before. He had noted well the place. There, before him, was the very crevice into which Kester had thrust his arm. Into that same crevice was Lionel's arm now thrust—elbow deep—shoulder deep. His groping fin-

gers soon laid hold of that which was hidden there. He drew out his arm quickly, and the something that he had found glittered steel-blue in the moonlight. With a cry of horror he dropped it, and it fell with a dull clash among the stones. Lionel Dering had recognized it in a moment as a dagger which he had last seen in the possession of Percy Osmond.

CHAPTER III.

MISS CULPEPPER SPEAKS HER MIND.

MRS. McDERMOTT had reached Pincote, and she did not fail to let every one know it. As the Squire had predicted, the moment she had taken off her waterproof, and changed her boots, she marched straight into the library, and asked for her money. It was with a feeling of profound satisfaction that her brother unlocked his bureau, and handed her a roll of notes representing five thousand seven hundred and fifty pounds. She counted the notes over twice, slowly and carefully.

"What are the seven hundred and fifty pounds for?" she asked.

"Interest for three years at five per cent. per annum."

"I thought you would have got me seven per cent. at the least," she said ungraciously. "My man of business tells me that seven is quite a common thing now-a-days. He says that he can get me nine or ten per cent. on real property, without any difficulty."

"I should advise you to be careful what you are about," said the Squire, gravely. "Big profits, big risks; little profits, little risks."

"I know perfectly well what I'm doing," said Mrs. McDermott, with a toss of her antiquated curls. "It's you slow, sleepy, country folks, who crawl behind the times, and miss half the golden chances that come to people who keep their eyes wide open."

The Squire shook his head, but said no more. He groaned in spirit when he thought what his "golden chance" had done for him.

"Let her buy her experience as I've bought mine," he said to himself. "From a girl she was always pig-headed: let her pay for it."

"Have you any idea how long your aunt is likely to stay?" he asked Jane, a day or two later.

"No idea whatever, papa. If the quantity of her luggage is anything to go by, I should say that her stay is likely to be a long one."

"I hope not, with all my heart," sighed the Squire.

Mrs. McDermott, in truth, was not a lady who ever troubled herself to make her presence agreeable to those with whom she might be staying. Consideration for the comfort of others was a thought that never entered her mind. From the day of her arrival at Pincote she began to interfere with the existing arrangements of the house; finding fault with everything: changing this, altering the other, and evidently determined to have her own way in all. The first thing she did was to find fault with her bedroom, although it was one of the pleasantest apartments in the house, and had been especially arranged by Jane herself with a view to her aunt's comfort. But it

was not the best bedroom—the state bedroom, therefore Mrs. McDermott would have none of it. Into the state bedroom, a gloomy apartment fronting the north, which was never used above once or twice in half a dozen years, she migrated at once with all her belongings. Her next act, she being without a maid of her own at the time, was to induct one of the Pincote servants into that office, taking her altogether from her proper duties, and not permitting her to do a stroke of work for any one but herself. Then she talked her brother into allowing the dinner hour to be altered from six to half-past seven; so that, as the Squire grumbled to himself, the cloth was hardly removed before it was time to go to bed. Then the Squire must never appear at dinner without a dress coat, and a white tie—articles which, of late years, he had been tacitly allowed to dispense with when dining en famille. A white cravat especially was to him an abomination. He never could tie the knot properly, and after crumpling three or four, and throwing them across the room in a rage, Jane's services

would generally have to be called into requisition as a last resource.

One other infliction there was which the Squire found it very difficult to bear patiently. After dinner, when there was no particular company at Pincote, it was an understood thing that the Squire should have the dining-room to himself for half an hour, in order that he might enjoy the post-prandial snooze which long custom had made almost a necessity with him. But this was an arrangement that failed to meet with the approbation of Mrs. McDermott. She insisted that the Squire should either accompany the ladies, or, otherwise, she herself would keep him company in the dining-room; and woe be to him if he dared so much as close an eye for five seconds! It was "Where are your manners, sir? I'm thoroughly ashamed of you;" or else, "Falling asleep, sir, in the presence of a lady? a clodhopper could do no more than that!" till the Squire felt as if his life were being slowly tormented out of him.

Nor did Jane fail to come in for a share of

her aunt's strictures. Mrs. McDermott evidently looked upon her as little more than a child. Firstly, her hair was not arranged in accordance with her aunt's ideas of propriety in such matters, which, truth to say, belonged to a somewhat antiquated school. Then the girl was altogether too bright and sunny-looking, with her bows of ribbon and bits of lace showing daintily here and there. And she was too forward in introducing topics of conversation at meal-times, instead of allowing the introduction of appropriate themes to come from her elders and her betters. Then Jane was addicted to the heinous offence of laughing too heartily, and too often. Altogether her aunt saw in her much that stood in need of reformation. Jane bore everything with a sort of good-humoured indifference. "The time to speak is not come yet. I will see how much further she will go," she said to herself. But when the cook came to her one morning and said: "If you please, miss, Mrs. Dermott says that for the future I am to take my dinner orders from her," then Jane thought

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that the time to speak was drawing very near indeed.

"Do as Mrs. McDermott tells you," she said quietly to the astonished cook.

"Well, I never! I thought that the mistress had more spirit than that," said the woman as she went back to her duties in the kitchen.

Next day brought the coachman. "Beg pardon, miss," he said, with a touch of his hair; "but Mrs. McDermott have given orders that the brougham and gray mare is to be ready for her every afternoon at three o'clock to the minute. I am to take the order, miss, I suppose?"

"Quite right, John, till I give you orders to the contrary."

Next came the gardener. "Very sorry, miss, but I shall have to give notice—I shall really."

"Why, what's amiss now, Gibson?"

"It's all Mrs. McDermott, miss; begging your pardon for saying so. Why will she pretend to understand gardening better than me that has been at it, man and boy, for fifty

year? Why will she come finding fault with this, that, and the other, in a way that neither the Squire nor you, miss, ever thinks of doing? And she not only finds fault, but gives orders, ridiculous orders, about things she knows nothing of. I can't stand it, miss, I really can't."

"Mrs. McDermott will give you no more orders, Gibson, after to-day. You can go back to your work with an easy mind."

Jane waited till next morning, and then having ascertained that her aunt had again given orders to the cook respecting dinner, she walked straight into the breakfast-room where she knew that she should find Mrs. McDermott alone, and busy with her correspondence—for she was a great letter writer at that hour of the morning.

"What a noisy girl you are," she said crossly, as her niece drew up a chair and sat down beside her. "I was just writing a few lines to dear Lady Clark when you came in in your usual brusque way and put all my ideas to flight."

"They must be poor, timid, little ideas, aunt, to be so easily frightened away," said Jane.

"Jane, there has been a flippant tone about you for the last day or two that I don't at all approve of. Flippancy in young people is easily acquired, but difficult to get rid of. The sooner you get rid of yours the better I shall be pleased."

Jane rose from her chair and swept Mrs. McDermott a stately curtsey. "Is it not almost time, aunt," she said quietly, "that you gave up treating me, and talking to me, as if I were a child?"

"If you are no longer a child in years, you are still very childish in many of your ways."

"You are quite epigrammatic this morning, aunt."

"Don't be impertinent, young lady."

"I have no intention of being impertinent. But I have come to see you about the order for dinner which you gave the cook half an hour ago."

"What about that?" asked Mrs. McDer-

mott snappishly. "In what way does it concern you?"

"It concerns me very materially indeed," answered Jane. "You have ordered several things for dinner that papa does not care about; some, in fact, that he never eats. Fried soles, for instance, and veal cutlets—articles he never touches. So I have told the cook to supplement your order with some turbot and a boiled fowl à la marquise. I have also told her that for the future she will receive from me every evening the menu for next day. Should my list contain nothing that you care about, the cook has orders to obtain specially for you any articles that you may wish to have."

"Upon my word! what next?" was all that Mrs. McDermott could gasp out at the moment, so overcome was she with rage and surprise.

"This next," said Jane. "From to-day the dinner hour will be altered back to six o'clock. Half-past seven suits neither papa nor me. Should the latter hour be a necessity with you, you can always have your dinner

served at that time in your own room. But papa and I will dine at six."

"I shall talk to your papa about this, and ascertain from his own lips whether I am to be dictated to and insulted by a chit like you."

"That is just what I must forbid you to do," said Jane. "Papa's health has not been what it ought to be for a long time past. Only a few weeks ago he had a slight stroke. Happily he soon recovered from it, but Dr. Davidson says that all exciting topics must be kept carefully from him. You know how little things will often excite him; and if you begin to worry him about any petty differences that may arise between you and me, you will do so at your peril, and must be satisfied to take whatever consequences may arise from your so doing."

Mrs. McDermott stared at her niece in open-mouthed wonder.

"Perhaps you have something more to say to me," she gasped out.

"Yes, several things. Before ordering the

brougham to be at your beck and call every day at three o'clock, it might, perhaps, be just as well to make sure that your brother is not likely to want it. He has taken to using it rather frequently of late."

"Oh, indeed; I'll make due inquiry," was all that Mrs. McDermott could find to say.

"And if I were you, I wouldn't go quite so often into the greenhouses, or near the men at work in the garden."

"Anything else, Miss Culpepper? You may as well finish the list while you are about it."

"Simply this: that after dinner papa must be left to himself for an hour. He is used to have a little sleep at such times, and he cannot do without it. This is most imperative."

"I was never so insulted in the whole course of my life."

"Then your life must have been a very fortunate one. There is no intention to insult you, aunt, as your own common sense will tell you when you come to think calmly over all that I have said. You are here as

papa's guest, and both he and I will do our best to make you comfortable. But there can be only one mistress at Pincote, and that mistress, at present, is your niece, Jane Culpepper."

And before Mrs. McDermott could find another word to say, Jane had bent over her, kissed her, and swept from the room.

For two days Mrs. McDermott dined in solitary state, at half-past seven, in her own room. But she found it so utterly wretched to have no one to talk to but her maid, that on the third day her resolution failed her; and when six o'clock came round she found herself in the dining-room, sitting next her brother, with something of the feeling of a school-girl who has been whipped and forgiven.

Her manner towards her brother and her niece was very frigid and stand-off-ish for several days to come. Towards the Squire she imperceptibly thawed, and the old familiar intimacy was gradually resumed between them. But between herself and Jane there

was something—a restraint, a coldness—which no time could altogether remove. It was impossible for the older woman to forget that she had been worsted in the encounter with her niece. Could she have seen some great misfortune, some heavy trouble, fall upon Jane, she could then have afforded to forgive her, but hardly otherwise.

It was with a sense of intense relief that Squire Culpepper handed over to his sister the five thousand pounds that he was indebted to her. It was a great weight off his mind, and although he did not say much to Tom Bristow about it, he was none the less grateful in his secret heart. He was still as much at a loss as ever to understand by what occult means Tom had been able to raise the mortgage of six thousand pounds on Prior's Croft. He had hinted more than once that he should like to know the secret by means of which a result so remarkable had been achieved, but to all such hints Tom seemed utterly impervious.

Still more surprised was the Squire when,

a few days after the six thousand pounds had been put into his hands, Tom came to him and said: "With regard to Prior's Croft, sir. You have taken my advice once in the matter: perhaps you won't object to it a second time."

"What is it, Bristow, what is it?" said the Squire, graciously. "I shall be glad to listen to anything you may have to say."

"What I want you to do, sir," said Tom, "is to have some plans at once drawn up, and have the foundations laid of a number of houses—twenty to thirty at the least—on Prior's Croft."

"I thought you crazy about the mortgage," said the Squire, with a twinkle in his eye. "Are you quite sure you are not crazy now?"

"I am just as sane now as I was then."

"But to build houses on Prior's Croft! Why, nobody would ever live in them. The place is altogether out of the way."

"That has nothing whatever to do with the question. If you will only take my ad-

vice, sir, you will get the foundations down without an hour's unnecessary delay."

"And where should I be at the end of a month, when the contractor came to me for the first instalment of his money?"

"All that can be arranged for without difficulty. Your credit is sound in the market, and that is the one thing indispensable."

"But what is to be the ultimate result of all these mysterious proceedings?"

"Now you get me in a corner. But I must again crave your indulgence, and ask you to let the mystery remain a mystery a little while longer. If you have sufficient faith in me, why, take my advice. If not—you will simply be missing a chance of making an odd thousand or so."

"And that is what I can by no means afford to do," said the Squire with emphasis.

The result was that a week later some forty or fifty men were busily at work cutting the turf and digging the foundations for the score of grand new villas which Mr. Culpepper had decided on building at Prior's Croft.

Everybody's verdict was that the Squire must be mad. New villas, indeed! Why there were hardly people enough in sleepy old Duxley to occupy the houses that fell vacant as the older inhabitants died off.

"That may be," said the Squire, when this plea was urged on his notice; "but I mean to make my villas so handsome, so commodious, and so healthy, that a lot of the old rattletrap dens will at once be deserted, and I shall not have house-room for half the people who will want to become my tenants." So spoke the Squire, putting a brave face on the matter, but really as much in the dark as any one.

But if there was one person more puzzled than another, that person was certainly Mr. Cope the banker. He had ascertained for a fact that within a few days of their interview —their very painful interview, he termed it to himself—his quondam friend had actually become the purchaser of Prior's Croft; and what was a still greater marvel, had actually paid down two thousand pounds in hard cash

for it! And now the town's talk was of nothing but the grand villas which the Squire was going to build on his new purchase. Mr. Cope could hardly credit it all till he went and saw with his own eyes the men hard at work. Still, it was altogether incomprehensible to him. Could the Squire have merely been playing him a trick; have only been testing the strength of his friendship, when he came to him to borrow the five thousand pounds? No, that could hardly be; else why had his balance at the bank been allowed to dwindle to a mere nothing? Besides which, he knew from words that the Squire had let drop at different times, that he must have been speculating heavily. Could it be possible that his speculations had, after all, proved successful? If not, how account for this sudden flood of prosperity? For several days Mr. Cope failed to enjoy his dinner in the hearty way that was habitual with him: for several nights Mr. Cope's sleep failed to refresh him as it usually did.

Although the Squire's heaviest burden had

been lifted off his mind with the payment of his sister's money, he had by no means forgotten the loss of his daughter's dowry. And now that his mind was easy on one point, this lesser trouble began to assume a magnitude that it had not possessed before. He could not get rid of the thought that there was nothing but his own frail life between his daughter and all but absolute penury. A few hundred pounds Jane would undoubtedly have, but what would that be to a young lady brought up as she had been brought up? "Not enough," as the Squire put it in his homely way, "to find her in bread-and-cheese and cotton gowns."

But what was to be done? Life assurance was out of the question. He was too old and too infirm. There was nothing much to be got out of the estate. It was true that he might thin the timber a little and make a few hundreds that way; but the heir-at-law had too shrewd an eye to his own ultimate interests to allow very much to be done in that line. Besides which, the Squire himself could not for

very shame have impaired what was the chief beauty of the Pincote property—its magnificent array of timber.

There was, perhaps, a little cheese-paring to be done in the way of cutting down domestic expenses. A couple of servants might be dispensed with indoors. The under-gardener and the stable-boy might be sent about their business. The gray mare and the brougham might be disposed of. The wine merchant's bill might be lightened a little; and fewer coals, perhaps, might be burnt in winter—and that was nearly all.

But even such reductions as these, trifling though they were, could not be made secretly—could not be made, in fact, without becoming the talk of the whole neighbourhood; and if there was one thing the Squire detested more than another, it was having his private affairs challenged and discussed by other people. And what, after all, would the saving amount to? How many years of such petty economy would be needed to scrape together even as much as one-fourth of the

sum he had lost by his mad speculations? It was all a muddle, as he said to himself; and his brain seemed getting hopelessly muddled, too, with asking the same questions over and over again, and still finding himself as far from a satisfactory answer as ever.

There was one thing that he could do, and one only, that had about it any real basis of satisfaction. He could sell that piece of ground which has already been spoken of as not forming part of the entailed estate—the piece of ground on which his new mansion was to have been built. Land, just now, was fetching good prices. Yes, he would certainly sell Knockley Holt, and fund in Jenny's name whatever money it might fetch—not that it would command a very high price, being a poor piece of land, as everybody knew. Still it would be a nest egg, though only a little one, for a rainy day.

CHAPTER IV.

KNOCKLEY HOLT.

ABOUT this time Tom Bristow found himself very often at Pincote. The Squire would have him there. It seemed as if he could not do without Tom's society. Since the loss of his money he had been getting more and more disinclined either for going out himself or having company at home. Still he could not altogether do without somebody to talk to now and then; and Tom being either a good listener or a lively talker, as occasion might require, and having already rendered the Squire an important service, it seemed somehow to fall into the natural order of things that he should be invited three or four times a week to dine at Pin-

cote. Nor after Mrs. McDermott's arrival was he there less frequently. Not that the Squire did not find his sister very lively company. In fact, he often found her too lively. She had too much to say: her tongue was never quiet. In season and out of season, she overwhelmed her brother with an unending flow of small-talk and petty gossip about things that had little or no interest for him; but about which he was obliged to feign an interest, unless, as he himself expressed it, "he wanted to know the length of his sister's tongue."

But when Tom was there the case was different. He acted as a sort of buffer between Mrs. McDermott and the Squire. By means of a few adroit questions, and a clever assumption of ignorance with regard to whatever topic Mrs. McDermott might be dilating on, he generally succeeded in drawing the full torrent of her conversation on his own devoted head, thereby affording the Squire a breathing space for which he was truly grateful. Sometimes, but not very often, Tom let the demon

of mischief get the mastery of him. On such occasions he would lead Mrs. McDermott on by one artful question after another till she began to contradict herself and eat her own words, and ended by floundering helplessly in a sort of mental quagmire, and so relapsing into sulky silence, with a dim sense upon her that she had somehow been coaxed into making an exhibition of herself by that demure-looking young scamp of a Bristow, who seemed hand and glove with both her brother and her niece after a fashion that she neither liked nor understood.

Yet was the love of hearing herself talk so ingrained in Mrs. McDermott's nature, that by the time of Tom's next visit to Pincote she was ready to fall into the same trap again, had he been inclined to lead her on.

"Who is that young Bristow that you and Jane make such a pet of?" she asked her brother one day. "I don't seem to recollect any family of that name hereabouts."

"Pet, indeed! Nobody makes a pet of him, as you call it," growled the Squire.

"He's the son of the doctor who attended poor Charlotte in her last illness. He's a sharp young fellow who has got his head screwed on the right way, and he's been useful to me in one or two business matters, and may be so again; so there's no harm in asking him to dinner now and then."

"Now and then with you seems to mean three or four times a week," sneered Mrs. McDermott.

"And what if it does?" retorted the Squire. "As long as I can call the house my own, I'll ask anybody I like to dinner, and as often as I like."

"Only if I were you, I wouldn't forget that I'd a daughter who was just at a marriageable age."

"Nor a sister who wouldn't object to a husband number two," chuckled the Squire. "Why not set your cap at young Bristow, eh, Fanny? You might do worse. He's young and not bad looking, and if he has no money of his own, he's just the right sort to look well after yours."

Mrs. McDermott fanned herself indignantly. "You never were very refined, Titus," she said; "but you certainly get coarser every time I see you."

Mr. Culpepper only chuckled to himself, and poked the fire vigorously.

"I'll have that young Bristow out of this house before I'm three weeks older!" vowed the widow to herself. "The way he and Jane carry on together is simply disgusting, and yet that poor weak brother of mine can't see it."

From that day forth she took to watching Tom and Jane more particularly than she had done before. Not satisfied with watching them herself, she induced her maid Emma to act as a spy on their actions. With her assistance, Mrs. McDermott was not long in gathering sufficient evidence to warrant her, as she thought, in seeking a private interview with her brother on the subject. "And high time too," she said grimly to herself. "That minx of a Jane is carrying on a fine game under the rose. The arrant little flirt! And

as for that young Bristow—of course it's Jane's money that he's after. Titus must be as blind as a bat, or he would have seen it all long ago. I've no patience with him—none!"

Having worked herself up to the requisite pitch, downstairs she bounced and burst into the Squire's private room—commonly called his study. She burst into the room, but halted suddenly the moment she had crossed the threshold. The Squire was there, but not alone. Tom Bristow was with him. The two were in deep consultation—so much she could see at a glance—bending towards each other over the little table, and speaking, as it seemed to her, almost in a whisper. The Squire turned with a gesture of impatience at the opening of the door. "Oh, is that you, Fanny?" he said. "I'll see you presently; I'm busy with Mr. Bristow, just now."

She went out without a word, but her face flushed deeply, and an evil look came into her eyes. "That's the way you treat your only sister, Mr. Titus Culpepper, is it?" she mut-

tered under her breath. "Not a penny of my money shall ever come to you or yours."

Tom had walked over to Pincote that morning to see the Squire respecting the building going on at Prior's Croft. When their conference had come to an end, said the Squire to Tom: "You know that scrubby bit of ground of mine—Knockley Holt?"

Tom started. "Yes, I know it very well," he said. "It is rather singular that you should be the first to speak about it; because it was partly about that very piece of ground that I am here this morning to see you."

"Ay—ay—how's that?" said the Squire, suddenly brightening up from the apathy that had begun to creep over him so often of late.

"Why, it doesn't seem to be of much use to you, and I thought that perhaps you wouldn't mind letting me have a lease of it."

The Squire laughed heartily: a thing he had not done for several weeks. "And I had just made up my mind to sell it, and was going to ask your advice about it!"

Tom's face flushed suddenly. "And do

you really think of selling Knockley Holt?" he asked, with his keen bright eyes bent on the Squire's face more keenly than usual.

"Of course I think of selling it, or I shouldn't have said what I have said. As things have gone with me, the money would be more useful to me than the land is ever likely to be. It won't fetch much I know, but then I didn't give much for it, and whoever may get it won't have much of a bargain."

"Perhaps you wouldn't object to have me for a purchaser?"

"You! You buy Knockley Holt? Why, man alive, you must know that I should want money down, and—— But I needn't say more about it."

"If you choose to sell Knockley Holt to me, I will give you twelve hundred pounds for it, cash down."

The Squire was getting into the way of not being astonished at anything that Tom might say, but he did look across at him for a moment or two in blank amazement.

"Well, you are a queer fish, and no mistake!" were his first words. "And pray, my young shaver, how come you to be possessed of twelve hundred pounds?"

"Oh, I'm worth a little more than twelve hundred pounds," said Tom, with a smile. "Why, only the other week I cleared a thousand by one little stroke in cotton."

"Well done, young one," said the Squire. heartily. "You are not such a fool as you look. And now take an old man's advice. Don't speculate any more. Fortune has given you one little slice of her cake. Don't tempt her again. Be content with what you've got, and speculate no more."

"At any rate, I won't forget your advice, sir," said Tom. "I wonder," he added to himself, "what he would think and say if he knew that it was by speculation, pure and simple, that I earn my bread and cheese."

"And so you would really like to buy Knockley Holt, eh?"

"I should indeed, if you are determined to sell it."

"Oh, I shall sell it, sure enough. But may I ask what you intend to do with it when you have got it?"

"Ah, sir, that is just one of those questions which you must not ask me," said Tom, laughingly. "If I buy it, it will be entirely on speculation. It may turn out a dismal failure: it may prove to be a big success."

"Well, well, that will be your look out," said the Squire, good-naturedly. "But, Bristow, it's not worth twelve hundred pounds, nor anything like that sum."

"I think it is, sir—at least to me, and I am quite prepared to pay that amount for it."

"I only gave nine fifty for it; and I thought that if I could get a clear thousand I should have every reason to be perfectly satisfied."

"I have made you an offer, sir. It is for you to say whether you are willing to accept it."

"Seeing that you offer me two hundred pounds more than I ever hoped to get, I'm not such an ass as to say, No. Only I think you

are robbing yourself. I do indeed, Bristow; and that's what I don't like to see."

"I think, sir, that I'm pretty well able to look after my own interests," said Tom, with a meaning smile. "Am I to consider that Knockley Holt is to become my property?"

"Of course you are, boy—of course you are. But I must say that you are a little bit of a simpleton to give me twelve hundred when you might have it for a thousand."

"An offer's an offer, and I'll abide by mine."

"Then there's nothing more to be said: I'll see my lawyer about the deeds to-morrow."

Tom shook hands with the Squire and went in search of Jane.

"Perhaps I may come in now," said Mrs. McDermott five minutes later, as she opened the door of her brother's room.

"Of course you may," said the Squire. "Young Bristow and I were talking over some business affairs before, that would have had no interest for you, and that you know nothing about."

"It's about young Bristow, as you call him, that I have come to see you this morning."

"Oh, indeed," said the Squire drily. Then he took off his spectacles, and rubbed them with his pocket handkerchief, and began to whistle a tune under his breath.

Mrs. McDermott glared fiercely at him, and her voice took an added tone of asperity when she spoke again. "I suppose you are aware that your protégé is making violent love to your daughter, or else that your daughter is making violent love to him: I hardly know which it is!"

"What!" thundered the Squire, as he started to his feet. "What is that you say, Fanny McDermott?"

"Simply this: that there is a lot of love-making going on between Jane and Mr. Bristow. If it is done with your sanction, I have not another word to say. But if you tell me that you know nothing about it, I can only say that you must have been as blind as a bat and as stupid as an owl."

"Thank you, Fanny—thank you," said the

Squire sadly, as he sat down in his chair again. "I dare say I have been both blind and stupid; and if what you tell me is true, I must have been."

"Miss Jane couldn't long deceive me," said the widow spitefully.

"Miss Jane is too good a girl to deceive anybody."

"Oh, in love matters we women hold that everything is fair. Deceit then becomes deceit no longer. We call it by a prettier name."

Her brother was not heeding her: he was lost in his own thoughts.

"The young vagabond!" he said at last. "So that's the way he's been hoodwinking me, is it? But I'll teach him: I'll have him know that I'm not to be made a fool of in that way. Make love to my daughter, indeed! I'll have him here to-morrow morning, and tell him a bit of my mind that will astonish him considerably."

"Why wait till to-morrow? Why not send for him now?"

"Because he left here a quarter of an hour ago."

"Oh, you would not have far to send for him."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that he and Jane are in the shrubbery together at the present moment."

The Squire stared at her helplessly for a moment or two. "How do you know that?" he said at last, speaking very quietly.

"Because my maid, who was returning from an errand, saw them walking there, arm in arm." She paused, as if expecting her brother to say something, but he did not speak. "I have not had my eyes shut, I assure you," she went on. "But in these matters women are always more quick-sighted than men. From the very first hour of my seeing them together I had my suspicions. All their walking and talking together couldn't be for nothing. All their hand-shakings and sly glances into each other's eyes couldn't be without a meaning."

The Squire got up from his chair and rang

the bell. A servant came in. "Ascertain whether Mr. Bristow is anywhere about the house or grounds; and, if he is, tell him that I should like to see him before he goes."

Mrs. McDermott rose in some alarm. It was no part of her policy to be seen there by Tom. "I am glad you have sent for him," she said. "I hope matters have not gone too far to be stopped without difficulty."

He looked up in a little surprise. "There will be no difficulty. Why should there be?" he said.

"No, of course not. As you say, why should there be? But I must now bid you good-morning for the present. There will be hardly any need, I think, for you to mention my name in the affair."

"There will be no need to mention anybody's name. Good-morning."

Mrs. McDermott went out and shut the door gently behind her. "Breaking fast, poor man," she said to herself. "He's not long for this world, I'm afraid. Well, I've the consolation of knowing that I've always

done a sister's duty by him. I wonder what he'll die worth. Thousands, no doubt; and all to go to that proud minx of a Jane. We are not allowed to hate one another, or else I'm afraid I should hate that girl."

She shook her fist at an imaginary Jane, went straight upstairs, and gave her maid a good blowing-up.

Some three weeks had now come and gone since Tom, breaking for once through the restraint which had hitherto kept him back, did and said something which made Jane very happy. What he did was to draw her face down to his and kiss it: what he said was simply, "Good-night, my darling." Nothing more, but quite enough to be understood by her to whom the words were spoken. But since that evening not one syllable more of love had been breathed by Tom. For anything that had since passed between them Jane might have imagined that she had merely dreamt the words—that the speaking of them was nothing more than a fancy of her own love-sick brain.

Under similar circumstances many young ladies would have considered themselves aggrieved, and would not have been deemed unreasonable in so thinking. But Jane had no intention whatever of adopting an injured tone even in her own inmost thoughts. She had never been in the habit of looking upon herself in the light of a victim, and she had no intention of beginning to do so now. Surprised —slightly surprised—she might be, but that was all. In Tom's manner towards her, in the way he looked at her, in the very tone of his voice, there was that indescribable something which gave her the sweet assurance that she was still loved as much as ever. Such being the case, she was well satisfied to wait. She felt that her lover's silence had a meaning, that he was not dumb without a reason. When the proper time should come he would speak, and to some purpose. Till then Eros should keep a finger on his lips, and speak only the language of the eyes.

"So this is the way you treat me, is it, young man?" said the Squire, sternly, as Tom re-entered the room.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Tom, looking at him in sheer amazement.

"Oh, don't pretend that you don't know what I mean."

"It may seem stupid on my part, but I must really plead ignorance."

"You worm yourself into my confidence till you get the run of the house, and can come and go as you like, and you finish up by making love to my daughter!"

"It is no crime to love Miss Culpepper, I hope, sir. There are few people, I imagine, who could know her without loving her."

"That's all very well, but you don't get over me in that way, young sir. What right have you to make love to my daughter? That's what I want to know."

"I may love Miss Culpepper, but I have never told her so."

"Do you mean to say that you have never asked her to marry you?"

"Never, sir; on that point I give you my word of honour."

"A good thing for you that you haven't.

The sooner you get that love tom-foolery out of your head the better."

"I promise you one thing, sir," said Tom; "if I ever do marry Miss Culpepper, it shall be with your full consent and good wishes."

The Squire could not help chuckling. "In that case, my boy, you will never have her —not if you live to be as old as Methuselah."

"Time will prove, sir."

"And look ye here. There must be no more walks in the shrubbery, no more gallivanting together among the woods. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, sir. Your words could not be plainer."

"I mean them to be plain. There seems to be no harm done so far, but it's time this nonsense was put a stop to. Miss Culpepper must marry in a very different sphere from yours."

"Pardon the remark, sir, but you were quite willing to take Mr. Edward Cope as your son-in-law. Now, I consider myself

quite as good a man as Mr. Cope—quite as eligible a suitor for your daughter's hand."

"Then I don't. Besides, young Cope would never have had the chance of getting her if he hadn't been the son of my oldest friend; the son of the man to whose bravery I owe my life itself. Master Edward owes it to his father and not to himself that I ever sanctioned his engagement to Miss Culpepper."

"I am indebted for this good turn to Mrs. McDermott," said Tom to himself, as he walked homeward through the park. "It will only have the effect of bringing matters to a climax a little earlier than I intended, but it will not alter my plans in the least."

"Fanny has been exaggerating as usual," was the Squire's comment. "There was something in it, no doubt, and it's just as well to have crushed it in the bud; but I think it's hardly worth while to say anything to Jenny about it."

A week later, the Squire happened to be riding on his white pony along the high road

that fringed one side of Knockley Holt, when, to his intense astonishment, he heard the regular monotonous puffing and saw the smoke of a steam engine that was apparently hard at work behind a clump of larches in the distance. Riding up to the spot, he found some score or so of men all busily engaged. They were excavating a hole in the hill-side, filling-in stout timber supports as they got deeper down; the engine on the top being employed to hoist up the earth in big bucket-fuls as fast as it was dug out.

"What's all this about?" inquired the Squire of one of the men; "and who's gaffer here?"

"Mr. Bristow, he be the gaffer, sur, and this hole be dug by his orders."

"Oh, ho! that's it, is it? And how deep are you going to dig the hole, and what do you expect to find when you get to the bottom?"

"I don't rightly know, sur, but I should think we be digging for water."

"A likely tale that! What the dickens

should anybody want water for when we haven't had a dry day for seven weeks?"

"Our foreman did say, sur, as how Mr. Bristow was going to have a hole dug clean through, so as to make a short cut like to the other side of the world. Anyhow, it be mortal dry work."

The Squire gave a grunt of dissatisfaction, and rode off. "What queer crotchet has that young jackanapes got into his head now?" he muttered to himself. "It's just possible, though, that there may be a method in his madness."

CHAPTER V.

AT THE THREE CROWNS HOTEL.

"Mon! Jean, whose is this luggage?" cried Pierre Janvard one morning to his head waiter. He pointed at the same time to a large portmanteau which lay among a pile of other luggage in the hall of the Three Crowns Hotel, Bath.

With that restless curiosity which was such a marked trait in his character, Janvard had a habit of peering about among the luggage of his guests, and even of prying stealthily about their bedrooms when he knew that their occupants were out of the way, and he himself safe from detection. It was not that he hoped to benefit himself in any way, or even to pick up any information that would

be of value to him, by such a mode of proceeding; but it had been a habit with him from boyhood to do this kind of thing, and it was a habit that he could by no means overcome.

Passing through the hall this morning, his eye had been attracted by a pile of luggage belonging to several fresh arrivals, and he at once began to peer among the labels. The second label that took his eye was inscribed, "Richard Dering, Esq., Passenger to Bath." Janvard stood aghast as he read the name. A crowd of direful memories rushed to his mind. For a moment or two he could not speak. Then he called Jean as above.

"That portmanteau," answered Jean, "belongs to a gentleman who came in by the last train. He and another gentleman came together. They wanted a private sitting-room, and I put them into number twenty-nine."

"Has the other gentleman any luggage?"

"Yes, this large black bag belongs to him."

Janvard stooped and read: "Tom Bristow, Esq., Passenger to Bath." "Quite strange

to me, that name," he muttered to himself. At this moment the boots came, and shouldering the luggage, hurried with it upstairs.

"They have ordered dinner, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you hear them say how long they were likely to stay here?"

"No, sir."

"Wait on them yourself at dinner. Bear in mind all that they talk about, and report it to me afterwards."

"Yes, sir."

Pierre Janvard retired to his sanctum considerably disturbed in mind. Was the fresh arrival any relation or connection of the dead Lionel Dering, or was it merely one of those coincidences of name common enough in every-day life? These were the two questions that he put to himself again and again.

One thing was quite evident to him. Himself unseen, he must contrive to see this unknown Richard Dering. If there were a possibility of the slightest shadow of danger springing either from this or from any other

quarter, it behoved him to be on his guard. He would see these people, after which, if requisite, he would at once write to Mr. Kester St. George for instructions.

He had just brought his cogitations to an end, and had opened his banker's passbook, the contemplation of which was a never-failing source of joy to him, when a tap came to the door, and next moment in walked Mr. Richard Dering and Mr. Tom Bristow.

It was on the face of this Richard Dering that Pierre Janvard's eyes rested first. In one brief glance he took in every detail of his appearance. Then his eyes fell. His sallow face grew sallower still. His thin lips quivered for a moment, and then his hands began to tremble slightly, so that in a little while he was obliged to take them off the table and bury them in his pockets.

He saw at once that this Mr. Dering must be a near relative of that other Mr. Dering whose face he remembered so well—whose face it was impossible that he should ever forget. They were alike, and yet strangely

unlike: the same in many points, and yet in others most different. But the moment this dark-looking stranger opened his lips, it seemed indeed as if Lionel Dering had come back from the grave. A covert glance at Mr. Bristow assured Janvard that in him he beheld a man whose face he had no recollection of having ever seen before.

"Your name is Janvard, I believe?" said Mr. Dering, with a slight bow.

"Pierre Janvard at your service," answered the Frenchman, deferentially.

"You were formerly, I believe, in the service of Mr. Kester St. George?"

"I had that honour."

"My name is Dering—Richard Dering. It is probable that you never heard of me before, seeing that I have only lately returned from India. I am cousin to Mr. Kester St. George."

The Frenchman bowed. "I have no recollection of having heard monsieur's name mentioned by my late employer."

"I suppose not. But my brother's name—Lionel Dering—must be well known to you."

Janvard could not repress a slight start. So that was the relationship, was it?

"Ah, yes," he said. "I have seen Mr. Lionel Dering many times, and done several little services for him at one time or another."

"You were one of the chief witnesses on the trial, if I recollect rightly?"

Janvard coughed, to gain a moment's time. The conversation was taking a turn that he did not approve of. "I certainly was one of the witnesses on the trial," he said, with an air of deprecation. "But monsieur will understand that it was a misfortune which I had no means of avoiding. I could not help seeing what I did see, and they made me tell all about it."

"Oh, we quite understand that," said Mr. Dering. "You were not to blame in any way. You could not do otherwise than as you did."

Janvard smiled faintly, and bowed his gratification.

"My friend here, Mr. Bristow, and myself, have come down to stay a week or two in

your charming city. The doctors tell me there is something the matter with my spleen, and have recommended me to drink the Bath waters. Hearing casually that you were the proprietor of one of the most comfortable hotels in the place, and looking upon you somewhat in the light of a connection of the family, we thought that we could not do better than take up our quarters with you."

Again Janvard smiled and bowed his gratification. "Monsieur may depend upon my using my utmost endeavours to make himself and his friend as comfortable as possible. Pardon my presumption, but may I venture to ask whether Mr. St. George was quite well when monsieur saw or heard from him last?"

"My cousin was a little queer a short time ago, but I believe him to be well again by this time." Mr. Dering turned to go. "We have given your waiter instructions as to dinner," he said.

"I hope my chef will succeed in pleasing you," said Janvard, with a smile. "He has

the reputation of being second to none in the city." With the same smile on his face he followed them to the door and bowed them out, and, still smiling, watched them till they turned the corner of the street. "No danger there, I think," he said to himself. "None whatever. Still I must keep on the watch—always on the watch. I must look to their dinners myself, and leave them nothing to complain of. But I shall be very much pleased indeed when they call for their bill: very much pleased to see the last of them."

Said Tom to Lionel, as they were walking arm-in-arm towards the pump-room: "Did you notice that magnificent ring which Janvard wore on the third finger of his left hand?"

"I could not fail to notice it. I was thinking about it at the very moment you spoke."

"I have not seen so splendid a ruby for a long time. The setting, too, is rather unique."

"Yes, it was the peculiar setting that caused me to recognize it again."

"That caused you to recognize it! You don't mean to say that you have ever seen the ring before?"

"I certainly have seen it before."

"Where?"

"On the finger of Percy Osmond."

Tom halted suddenly and stared at Lionel as if he could hardly believe the evidence of his ears.

"I am stating nothing but the simple truth," continued Lionel. "The moment I saw the ring on Janvard's finger the thought flashed through me that I had certainly seen it somewhere before. All the time I was talking to Janvard I was trying to call that somewhere to mind, but it did not come to me till after we had left the hotel—not, in fact, till a minute before you spoke about it."

"Are you sure you are not mistaken? There are many ruby rings in the world."

"I don't for one moment think that I am mistaken," answered Lionel deliberately. "If the ring worn by Janvard be the one I mean, it has three initial letters engraved inside the

hoop. What particular letters they are I cannot now recollect. I chanced to express my admiration of the ring one night in the billiard-room, and Osmond took it off his finger in order that I might examine it. It was then I saw the letters, but without noticing them with sufficient particularity to remember them again."

"I always had an idea," said Tom, "that Janvard was in some way mixed up with the murder, and this would seem to prove it. He must have stolen the ring from Osmond's room either immediately before or immediately after the murder."

"I must see that ring," said Lionel decisively. "It must come into my possession, if only for a minute or two, if only while I ascertain whether the initials are really there."

"I don't think that there will be much difficulty about that," said Tom. "The fellow has no suspicion as to whom you really are, or as to the object of our visit to Bath. To admire the ring is the first step: to ask to look at it the second."

A quarter of an hour later Lionel gripped Tom suddenly by the arm. "Bristow," he whispered, "I have just remembered something. Osmond had that ruby ring on his finger the night before he was murdered! I have a distinct recollection of seeing it on his hand when we were playing that last game of billiards together."

"If this ring," said Tom, "prove to be the one you believe it to be, the finding of it will be another and a most important link in the chain of evidence."

"Yes—almost, if not quite, the last one that we shall need," said Lionel.

At dinner that evening Janvard in person took in the wine. The eyes of both Lionel and Tom fixed themselves instinctively on his left hand. The ring was no longer there.

"Can he suspect anything?" asked Lionel of Tom, as soon as they were alone.

"I think not," answered Tom. "The fellow is evidently uneasy, and will continue to be so as long as you stay under his roof. But the very openness of our proceedings, and the

frank way in which we have told him who we are, will go far to disarm any suspicions which he might otherwise have entertained."

Two or three days passed quietly over. Lionel drank the waters with regularity, and he and Tom drove out frequently in the neighbourhood of King Bladud's beautiful city. Janvard always gave them a look in in the course of dinner to see that everything was to their satisfaction; but he still carefully abstained from wearing the ring.

By-and-by there came a certain evening when Janvard failed to put in his usual appearance at the dinner table. Said Tom to the man who waited upon them: "Where is your master this evening? Not ill, I hope?"

"Gone to a masonic banquet, sir," answered the man.

"Then he won't be home till late, I'll wager."

"Not till eleven or twelve, I dare say, sir."

"Gone in full fig, of course?" said Tom, laughingly.

"Yes, sir," answered the man with a grin.

"Diamond studs and ruby ring, and everything complete, eh?" went on Tom.

"I don't know about diamond studs, sir," said the man, "but he certainly had his ring on, for I saw it on his finger myself."

"Now is our time," said Tom to Lionel, as soon as the man had left the room. "We may not have such an opportunity again."

It was close upon midnight when Pierre Janvard, alighting from a fly at the door of his hotel, found his two lodgers standing on the steps smoking a last cigar before turning in for the night. In this there was nothing unusual—nothing to excite suspicion.

"Hallo! Janvard, is that you?" cried Tom, assuming the tone and manner of a man who has taken a little too much wine. "I was just wondering what had become of you. This is my birthday: so you must come upstairs with us, and drink my health in some of your own wine."

"Another time, sir, I shall be most happy; but to-night——"

"But me no buts," cried Tom. "I'll have

no excuses—none. Come along, Dering, and we'll crack another bottle of Janvard's Madeira. We'll poison mine host with his own tipple."

He seized Janvard by the arm, and dragged him upstairs, trolling out the last popular air as he did so. Lionel followed leisurely.

"You're a good sort, Janvard—a deuced good sort!" said Tom.

"Monsieur is very kind," said Janvard, with a smile and a shrug; and then in obedience to a wave from Tom's hand, he sat down at table. Tom now began to fumble with a bottle and a corkscrew.

"Allow me, monsieur," said Janvard, politely, as he relieved Tom of the articles in question, and proceeded to open the bottle with the ease of long practice.

"That's a sweet thing in rings you've got on your finger," said Tom, admiringly.

"Yes, it is rather a fine stone," said Janvard, dryly.

"May I be allowed to examine it?" asked

Tom, as he poured out the wine with a hand that was slightly unsteady.

"I should be most happy to oblige monsieur," said Janvard, hastily, "but the ring fits me so tightly that I am afraid I should have some difficulty in getting it off my finger."

"Hang it all, man, the least you can do is to try," cried Tom.

The Frenchman flushed slightly, drew off the ring with some little difficulty, and passed it across the table to Tom. Tom's fingers clutched it like a vice. Janvard saw the movement and half rose, as if to reclaim the ring; but it was too late, and he sat down without speaking.

Tom pushed the ring carelessly over one of his fingers, and turned it towards the light. "A very pretty gem, indeed!" he said. "And worth something considerable in sovereigns, I should say."

"Will you allow me to examine it for a moment?" asked Lionel gravely, as he held out his hand. For the second time Janvard half rose from his seat, and for the second

time he sat down without a word. Tom handed the ring across to Lionel.

"A magnificent stone, indeed," said the latter, "but somewhat old-fashioned in the setting. But that only makes it the more valuable in my eyes. A family heirloom, without doubt. And see! inside the hoop are three initials. They are somewhat difficult to decipher, but if I read them aright they are M. K. L."

"Yes, yes, monsieur," said Janvard, uneasily. "As you say, M. K. L. The initials of the friend who gave me the ring." He held out his hand, as if expecting that the ring should at once be given back to him, but Lionel took no notice of the action.

"Three very curious initials, indeed," said Lionel, musingly. "One could not readily fit them to many names. M. K. L. They put me in mind of a curious coincidence—of a very remarkable coincidence indeed. I once had a friend who had a ruby ring very similar to this one, and inside the hoop of my friend's ring were three initials. The initials in ques-

tion were M. K. L. Precisely the same as the letters engraved on your ring, Monsieur Janvard. Curious, is it not?"

"Mille diables! I am betrayed!" cried Janvard, as he started from his seat, and made a snatch at the ring. But Lionel was too quick for him. The ring had disappeared, but Janvard had it not.

He turned with a snarl like that of a wild animal brought to bay, and looked towards the door. But between him and the door now stood Tom Bristow, no longer with any signs of inebriety about him, but as cold, quiet, and collected as ever he had looked in his life. Tom's right hand was hidden in the bosom of his vest, and Janvard's ears were smitten by the ominous click of a revolver. His eyes wandered back to the stern dark face of Lionel. There was no hope for him there. The pallor of his face deepened. His wonderful nerve for once was beginning to desert him. He was trembling visibly.

"Sit down, sir," said Lionel, sternly, "and refresh yourself with another glass of wine.

I have something of much importance to say to you."

The Frenchman hesitated for a moment. Then he shrugged his shoulders and sat down. His sang-froid was coming back to him. He drank two glasses of wine rapidly one after another.

"I am ready, monsieur," he said, quietly, as he wiped his thin lips, and made a ghastly effort to smile. "At your service."

"What I want from you, and what you must give me," said Lionel, "is a full and particular account of how this ring came into your possession. It belonged to Percy Osmond, and it was on his finger the night he was murdered."

"Ah ciel! how do you know that?"

"It is enough that what I say is true, and that you cannot gainsay it. But this ring was not on the finger of the murdered man when he was found next morning. Tell me how it came into your possession."

For a moment or two Janvard did not speak. Then he said, sulkily: "Who are you that

come here under false pretences, and question me and threaten me in this way ?"

"I am not here to answer your questions. You are here to answer mine."

"What if I refuse to answer them ?"

"In that case the four walls of a prison will hold you in less than half an hour. In your possession I find a ring which was on the finger of Mr. Osmond the night he was murdered. Less than that has brought many a better man than you to the gallows : be careful that it does not land you there ?"

"If you know anything of the affair at all, you must know that the murderer of Mr. Osmond was tried and found guilty long ago."

"What proof have you—what proof was there adduced at the trial, that Lionel Dering was the murderer of Percy Osmond ? Did your eyes, or those of any one else, see him do the bloody deed ? Wretch ! You knew from the first that he was innocent ! If you yourself are not the murderer, you know the man who is."

Again Janvard was silent for a little while. His eyes were bent on the floor. He was considering deeply within himself. At length he spoke, but it was in the same sullen tone that he had used before.

"What guarantee have I that when I have told you anything that I may know, the information will not be used against me to my own harm?"

"You have no guarantee whatever. I could not give you any such promise. For aught I know to the contrary, you, and you alone, may be the murderer of Percy Osmond."

Janvard shuddered slightly. "I am not the murderer of Percy Osmond," he said quietly.

"Who, then, was the murderer?"

"My late master—Mr. Kester St. George."

There was a pause which no one seemed inclined to break. Although Janvard's words were but a confirmation of the suspicions which Lionel and Tom had all along entertained, they seemed to fall on their ears with

all the force of a startling revelation. Of the three men there, Janvard was the one who seemed least concerned.

Lionel was the first to speak. "This is a serious charge to make against a gentleman like Mr. St. George," he said.

"I have made no charge against Mr. St. George," said Janvard. "It is you who have forced the confession from me."

"You are doubtless prepared to substantiate your statement—to prove your words?"

"I do not want to prove anything. I want to hold my tongue, but you will not let me."

"All I want from you is the simple truth, and that you must tell me."

"But, monsieur——" began Janvard, appealingly, and then he stopped.

"You are afraid, and justly so. You are in my power, and I can use that power in any way that I may deem best. At the same time, understand me. I am no constable—no officer of the law—I am simply the brother of Lionel Dering, and knowing,

as I do, that he was accused and found guilty of a crime of which he was as innocent as I am, I have vowed that I will not rest night or day till I have discovered the murderer and brought him to justice. Such being the case, I tell you plainly that the best thing you can do is to make a full and frank confession of all that you know respecting this terrible business, leaving it for me afterwards to decide as to the use which I may find it requisite to make of your confession. Are you prepared to do what I ask of you?"

Janvard's shoulders rose and fell again. "I cannot help myself," he said. "I have no choice but to comply with the wishes of monsieur."

"Sensibly spoken. Try another glass of wine. It may help to refresh your memory."

"Alas! monsieur, my memory needs no refreshing. The incidents of that night are far too terrible to be forgotten." With a hand that still shook slightly he poured himself out another glass of wine and drank it off at a draught. Then he continued: "On

the night of the quarrel in the billiard-room at Park Newton I was sitting up for my master, Mr. St. George. About midnight the bell rang for me, and on answering it, my master put Mr. Osmond into my hands, he being somewhat the worse for wine, with instructions to see him safely to bed. This I did, and then left him. As it happened, I had taken a violent fancy to Mr. Osmond's splendid ruby ring—the very ring monsieur has now in his possession—and that night I determined to make it my own. There were several new servants in the house, and nobody would suspect me of having taken it. Mr. Osmond had drawn it off his finger, and thrown it carelessly into his dressing-bag which he locked before getting into bed, afterwards putting his keys under his pillow.

"When the house was quiet, I put on a pair of list slippers and made my way to Mr. Osmond's bedroom. The door was unlocked and I went in. A night-lamp was burning on the dressing-table. The full moon shone in through the uncurtained window, and its

rays slanted right across the sleeper's face. He lay there, sleeping the sleep of the drunken, with one hand clenched, and a frown on his face as if he were still threatening Mr. Dering. It was hardly the work of a minute to possess myself of the keys. In another minute the dressing-case was opened and the ring my own. Mr. Osmond's portmanteau stood invitingly open: what more natural than that I should desire to turn over its contents lightly and delicately? In such cases I am possessed by the simple curiosity of a child. I was down on my knees before the portmanteau, admiring this, that, and the other, when, to my horror, I heard the noise of coming footsteps. No concealment was possible, save that afforded by the long curtains which shaded one of the windows. Next moment I was safely hidden behind them.

"The footsteps came nearer and nearer, and then some one entered the room. The sleeping man still breathed heavily. Now and then he moaned in his sleep. All my

fear of being found out could not keep me from peeping out of my hiding-place. What I saw was my master, Mr. Kester St. George, standing over the sleeping man, with a look on his face that I had never seen there before. He stood thus for a full minute, and then he came round to the near side of the bed, and seemed to be looking for Mr. Osmond's keys. In a little while he saw them in the dressing-bag where I had left them. Then he crossed to the other side of the room and proceeded to try them one by one, till he had found the right one, in the lock of Mr. Osmond's writing-case. He opened the case, took out of it Mr. Osmond's cheque book, and from that he tore either one or two blank cheques. He had just relocked the writing-case when Mr. Osmond suddenly awoke and started up in bed. 'Villain! what are you doing there?' he cried, as he flung back the bedclothes. But before he could set foot to the floor, Mr. St. George sprang at his throat, and pinned him down almost as easily as if he had been a boy. What happened during the next minute

I hardly know how to describe. It would seem that Mr. Osmond was in the habit of sleeping with a dagger under his pillow. At all events, there was one there on this particular night. As soon as he found himself pinned down in bed, his hand sought for and found this dagger, and next moment he made a sudden stab with it at the breast of Mr. St. George. But my master was too quick for him. There was an instant's struggle—a flash—a cry—and—you may guess the rest.

"A murmur of horror escaped my lips. In another instant my master had sprung across the room and had torn away the curtains from before me. 'You here!' he said. And for a few seconds I thought my fate would be the same as that of Mr. Osmond. But at last his hand dropped. 'Janvard, you and I must be friends,' he said. 'From this night your interests are mine, and my interests are yours.' Then we left the room together. A terrible night, monsieur, as you may well believe!"

"You have accounted clearly enough for the murder, but you have not yet told us how it happened that Lionel Dering came to be accused of the crime."

"That is the worst part of the story, sir. Whose thought it was first, whether Mr. St. George's or mine, to lay the murder at the door of Mr. Dering, I could not now tell you. It was a thought that seemed to come into the heads of both of us at the same moment. As monsieur knows, my master had no cause to love his cousin. He had every reason to hate him. Mr. Dering had got all the estates and property that ought to have been Mr. St. George's. But if Mr. Dering were to die without children, the estate would all come back to his cousin. Reason enough for wishing Mr. Dering dead.

"We did not talk much about it, my master and I. We understood one another without many words. There were certain things to be done which Mr. St. George had not the nerve to do. I had the nerve to do them, and I did them. It was I who put Mr.

Dering's stud under the bed. It was I who took his handkerchief, and——"

"Enough!" said Lionel, with a shudder. "Surely no more devilish plot was ever hatched by Satan himself! You—you who sit so calmly there, had but to hold up your finger to save an innocent man from disgrace and death!"

"What would monsieur have?" said Janvard, with another of his indescribable shrugs. "Mr. St. George was my master. I liked him, and I was, besides, to have a large sum of money given me to keep silence. Mr. Dering was a stranger to me. Voilà tout."

"Janvard, you are one of the vilest wretches that ever disgraced the name of man!"

"Monsieur s'amuse."

"I shall at once proceed to put down in writing the heads of the confession which you have just made. You will sign the writing in question in the presence of Mr. Bristow as witness. You need be under no apprehension that any immediate harm will happen to you.

As for Mr. St. George, I shall deal with him in my own time, and in my own way. There are, however, two points that I wish you to bear particularly in mind. Firstly, if, even by the vaguest hint, you dare to let Mr. St. George know that you have told me what you have told me to-night, it will be at your own proper peril, and you must be prepared to take the consequences that will immediately ensue. Secondly, you must hold yourself entirely at my service, and must come to me without delay whenever I may send for you, and wherever I may be. Do you clearly understand?"

"Yes, sir. I understand."

"For the present, then, I have done with you. Two hours later I will send for you again, in order that you may sign a certain paper which will be ready by that time. You may go."

"But, monsieur——"

"Not a word. Go."

Tom held open the door for him, and Janvard passed out without another word.

"At last, Dering! At last everything is made clear!" said Tom, as he crossed the room and laid his hand affectionately on Lionel's shoulder. "At last you can proclaim your innocence to the world."

"Yes, my task is nearly done," said Lionel, sadly. "And I thank heaven in all sincerity that it is so. But the duty that I have still to perform is a terrible one. I almost feel as if now, at this, the eleventh hour, I could go no farther. I shrink in horror from the last and most terrible step of all. Hark! whose voice was that?"

"I hear nothing save the moaning of the wind, and the low muttering of thunder far away among the hills."

"It seemed to me that I heard the voice of Percy Osmond calling to me from the grave—the same voice that I have heard so often in my dreams."

"How your hand burns, Dering! Shake off these wild fancies, I implore you," said Tom. "What a blinding flash was that!"

"They are no wild fancies to me, but most

dread realities. I tell you it is Osmond's voice that I hear. I know it but too well. 'Thou shalt avenge!' it says to me. Only three words: 'Thou shalt avenge!'"

CHAPTER VI.

TOM FINDS HIS TONGUE.

NEARLY a fortnight elapsed after Tom's last interview with the Squire before he was again invited to Pincote, and after what had passed between himself and Mr. Culpepper he would not go there again without a special invitation. It is probable that the Squire would not have sent for him even at the end of a fortnight had he not grown so thoroughly tired of having to cope with Mrs. McDermott single-handed that he was ready to call in assistance from any quarter that promised relief. He knew that Tom would assist him if only a hint were given that he was wanted to do so. And Tom did relieve

him; so that for the first time for many days the Squire really enjoyed his dinner.

Notwithstanding all this, matters were so arranged between the Squire and Mrs. McDermott that no opportunity was given Tom of being alone with Jane even for five minutes. The first time this happened he thought that it might perhaps have arisen from mere accident. But the next time he went up to Pincote he saw too clearly what was intended to allow him to remain any longer in doubt. That night, after shaking hands with Tom at parting, Jane found in her palm a tiny note, the contents of which were three lines only. "Should you be shopping in Duxley either to-morrow or next day, I shall be at the toll-gate on the Snelsham road from twelve till one o'clock."

Next day, at half-past twelve to the minute, Jane and her pony-carriage found themselves at the Snelsham toll-gate. There was Tom, sure enough, who got into the trap and took the reins. He turned presently into a by-road that led to nowhere in particular, and

there earned the gratitude of Diamond by letting him lapse into a quiet walk which enabled him to take sly nibbles at the road-side grass as he crawled contentedly along.

Two or three minutes passed in silence. Then Tom spoke. "Jane," he said, and it was the first time he had ever called her by her Christian name, "Jane, your father has forbidden me to make love to you."

It seemed as if Jane had nothing to say either for or against this statement. She only breathed a little more quickly, and a lovelier colour flushed her cheeks. But just then Diamond swerved towards a tempting tuft of grass. The carriage gave a slight jerk, and Tom fancied—but it might be nothing more than fancy—that, instinctively, Jane drew a little closer to him. And when Diamond had been punished by the slightest possible flick with the whip between his ears, and was again jogging peacefully on, Jane did not get farther away again, being, perhaps, still slightly nervous; and when Tom looked down there was a little gloved hand resting,

light as a feather, on his arm. It was impossible to resist the temptation. Dispensing with the whip for a moment he lifted the little hand tenderly to his lips and kissed it. He was not repulsed.

"Yes, dearest," he went on, "I am absolutely forbidden to make love to you. I can only imagine that your aunt has been talking to your father about us. Be that as it may, he has forbidden me to walk out with you, or even to see you alone. The reason why I asked you to meet me to-day was to tell you of these things."

Still Jane kept silence. Only from the little hand, which had somehow found its way back on to his arm, there came the faintest possible pressure, hardly heavy enough to have crushed a butterfly.

"I told him that I loved you," resumed Tom, "and he could not say that it was a crime to do so. But when I told him that I had never made love to you, or asked you to marry me, he seemed inclined to doubt my veracity. However, I set his mind at rest by

giving him my word of honour that, even supposing you were willing to have me—a point respecting which I had very strong doubts indeed—I would not take you for my wife without first obtaining his full consent to do so."

Here Diamond, judging from the earnestness of Tom's tone that his thoughts were otherwhere, and deeming the opportunity a favourable one to steal a little breathing-time, gradually slackened his slow pace into a still slower one, till at last he came to a dead stand. Admonished by a crack of the whip half a yard above his head that Tom was still wide awake, he put on a tremendous spurt—for him—which, as they were going down hill at the time, was not difficult. But no sooner had they reached a level bit of road again than the spurt toned itself down to the customary slow trot, with, however, an extra whisk of the tail now and then which seemed to imply: "Mark well what a fiery steed I could be if I only chose to exert myself."

"All this but brings me to one point," said

Tom: "that I have never yet told you that I loved you, that I have never yet asked you to become my wife. To-day, then—here—this very moment, I tell you that I do love you as truly and sincerely as it is possible for man to love; and here I ask you to become my wife. Get along, Diamond, do, sir."

"Dearest, you are not blind," he went on. "You must have seen, you must have known, for a long time past, that my heart—my love—were wholly yours; and that I might one day win you for my own has been a hope, a blissful dream, that has haunted me and charmed my life for longer than I can tell. I ought, perhaps, to have spoken of this to you before, but there were certain reasons for my silence which it is not necessary to dilate upon now, but which, if you care to hear them, I will explain to you another time. Here, then, I ask you whether you feel as if you could ever learn to love me, whether you can ever care for me enough to become my wife. Speak to me, darling—whisper the one little word I burn to hear. Lift your eyes to mine, and let

me read there that which will make me happy for life.'

Except these two, there was no human being visible. They were alone with the trees, and the birds, and the sailing clouds. There was no one to overhear them save that sly old Diamond, and he pretended to be not listening a bit. For the second time he came to a stand-still, and this time his artfulness remaind unreproved and unnoticed.

Jane trembled a little, but her eyes were still cast down. Tom tried to see into their depths but could not. "You promised papa that you would not take me from him without his consent," she said, speaking in little more than a whisper. "That consent you will never obtain."

"That consent I shall obtain if you will only give me yours first."

He spoke firmly and unhesitatingly. Jane could hardly believe her ears. She looked up at him in sheer surprise. For the first time their eyes met.

"You don't know papa as well as I do—

how obstinate he is—how full of whims and crotchets. No—no; I feel sure that he will never consent."

"And I feel equally sure that he will. I have no fear on that score—none. But I will put the question to you in another way, in the short business-like way that comes most naturally to a man like me. Jane, dearest, if I can persuade your father to give you to me, will you be so given? Will you come to me and be my own—my wife—for ever?"

Still no answer. Only imperceptibly she crept a little closer to his side—a very little. He took that for his answer. First one arm went round her and then the other. He drew her to his heart, he drew her to his lips; he kissed her and called her his own. And she? Well, painful though it be to write it, she never reproved him in the least, but seemed content to sit there with her head resting on his shoulder, and to suffer Love's sweet punishment of kisses in silence.

It is on record that Diamond was the first to move.

While standing there he had fallen into a snooze, and had dreamt that another pony had been put into his particular stall and was at that moment engaged in munching his particular truss of hay. Overcome by his feelings, he turned deliberately round, and started for home at a gentle trot. Thus disturbed, Tom and Jane came back to sublunary matters with a laugh, and a little confusion on Jane's part. Tom drove her back as far as the toll-gate and then shook hands and left her. Jane reached home as one in a blissful dream.

Three days later Tom received a note in the Squire's own crabbed hand-writing, asking him to go up to Pincote as early as possible. He was evidently wanted for something out of the ordinary way. Wondering a little, he went. The Squire received him in high good humour and was not long in letting him know why he had sent for him.

"I have had some fellows here from the railway company," he said. "They want to buy Prior's Croft."

Tom's eyebrows went up a little. "I thought, sir, it would prove to be a profitable speculation by-and-by. Did they name any price?"

"No, nothing was said as to price. They simply wanted to know whether I was willing to sell it."

"And you told them that you were?"

"I told them that I would take time to think about it. I didn't want to seem too eager, you know."

"That's right, sir. Play with them a little before you finally hook them."

"From what they said they want to build a station on the Croft."

"Yes, a new passenger station, with plenty of siding accommodation."

"Ah! you know something about it, do you?"

"I know this much, sir, that the proposal of the new company to run a fresh line into Duxley has put the old company on their mettle. In place of the dirty ram-shackle station with which we have all had to be con-

tent for so many years, they are going to give us a new station, handsome and commodious; and Prior's Croft is the place named as the most probable site for the new terminus."

"Hang me, if I don't believe you knew something of this all along!" said the Squire. "If not, how could you have raised that heavy mortgage for me?"

There was a twinkle in Tom's eyes but he said nothing. Mr. Culpepper might have been still further surprised had he known that the six thousand pounds was Tom's own money, and that, although the mortgage was made out in another name, it was to Tom alone that he was indebted.

"Have you made up your mind as to the price you intend to ask, sir?"

"No, not yet. In fact, it was partly to consult you on that point that I sent for you."

"Somewhere about nine thousand pounds, sir, I should think, would be a fair price."

The Squire shook his head. "They will never give anything like so much as that."

"I think they will, sir, if the affair is judi-

ciously managed. How can they refuse in the face of a mortgage for six thousand pounds?"

"There's something in that, certainly."

"Then there are the villas—yet unbuilt it is true—but the plans of which are already drawn, and the foundations of some of which are already laid. You will require to be liberally remunerated for your disappointment and outlay in respect of them."

"I see it all now. Splendid idea that of the villas."

"Considering the matter in all its bearings, nine thousand pounds may be regarded as a very moderate sum."

"I won't ask a penny less."

"With it you will be able to clear off both the mortgage and the loan of two thousand, and will then have a thousand left for your expenses in connection with the villas."

The Squire rubbed his hands. "I wish all my speculations had turned out as successful as this one," he said. "This one I owe to you, Bristow. You have done me a service that I can never forget."

Tom rose to go. "Mrs. McDermott quite well, sir?" he said, with the most innocent air in the world.

"If the way she eats and drinks is anything to go by, she was never better in her life. But if you take her own account, she's never well —a confirmed invalid she calls herself. I've no patience with the woman, though she is my sister. A day's hard scrubbing at the wash-tub every week would do her a world of good. If she would only pack up her trunks and go, how thankful I should be!"

"If you wish her to shorten her visit at Pincote, I think you might easily persuade her to do so."

"I'd give something to find out how. No, no, Bristow, you may depend that she's a fixture here for three or four months to come. She knows—no woman alive better—when she's in comfortable quarters."

"If I had your sanction to do so, sir, I think that I could induce her to hasten her departure from Pincote."

The Squire rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"You are a queer fellow, Bristow," he said, "and you have done some strange things, but to induce my sister to leave Pincote before she's ready to go will cap all that you've done yet."

"I cannot of course induce her to leave Pincote till she is willing to go, but after a little quiet talk with me, it is possible that she may be willing, and even anxious, to get away as quickly as possible."

The Squire shook his head. "You don't know Fanny McDermott as well as I do," he said.

"Have I your permission to try the experiment?"

"You have—and my devoutest wishes for your success. Only you must not compromise me in any way in the matter."

"You may safely trust me not to do that. But you must give me an invitation to come and stay with you at Pincote for a week."

"With all my heart."

"I shall devote myself very assiduously to Mrs. McDermott, so that you must not be

surprised if we seem to be very great friends in the course of a couple of days."

"Do as you like, boy. I'll take no notice. But she's an old soldier, is Fan, and if for a single moment she suspects what you are after, she'll nail her colours to the mast, defy us all, and stop here for six months longer."

"It is, of course, quite possible that I may fail," said Tom, "but somehow I hardly think that I shall."

"We'll have a glass of sherry together and drink to your success. By-the-by, have you contrived yet to purge your brain of that lovesick tomfoolery?"

"If, sir, you intend that phrase to apply to my feelings with regard to Miss Culpepper, I can only say that they are totally unchanged."

"What an idiot you are in some things, Bristow!" said the Squire, crustily. "Remember this—I'll have no love-making here next week."

"You need have no fear on that score, sir."

CHAPTER VII.

EXIT MRS. MCDERMOTT.

TOM and his portmanteau reached Pincote together a day or two after his last conversation with the Squire. Mrs. McDermott understood that Tom had been invited to spend a week there in order to assist her brother with his books and farm accounts. It seemed to her a very injudicious thing to do, but she did not say much about it. In truth, she was rather pleased than otherwise to have Tom there. It was dreadfully monotonous to have to spend one evening after another with no company save that of her brother and Jane. She was tired of her audience, and her audience were tired of her.

Mr. Bristow, as she knew already, could talk well, was lively company, and, above all things, was an excellent listener. She had done her duty by her brother in warning him of what was going on between Mr. Bristow and her niece; if, after that, the Squire chose to let the two young people come together, it was not her place to dispute his right to do so.

Tom was very attentive to her at dinner that day. Of Jane he took no notice beyond what the occasion absolutely demanded. Mrs. McDermott was agreeably surprised. "He has come to his senses at last, as I thought he would," she said to herself. "Grown tired of Jane's society, and no wonder. There's nothing in her."

As soon as the cloth was removed, Jane excused herself on the score of a headache, and left the room. The Squire got into an easy-chair and settled himself down for a post-prandial nap. Tom moved his chair a little nearer that of the widow.

"I have grieved to see you looking so far from

well, Mrs. McDermott," he said, as he poured himself out another glass of wine. "My father was a doctor, and I suppose I caught the habit from him of reading the signs of health or sickness in people's faces."

Mrs. McDermott was visibly discomposed. She was a great coward with regard to her health, and Tom knew it.

"Yes," she said, "I have not been well for some time past. But I was not aware that the traces of my indisposition were so plainly visible to others."

"They are visible to me because, as I tell you, I am half a doctor both by birth and bringing up. You seem to me, Mrs. McDermott, pardon me for saying so—to have been fading—to have been going backward, as it were, almost from the day of your arrival at Pincote."

Mrs. McDermott coughed and moved uneasily on her chair. "I have been a confirmed invalid for years," she said, querulously, "and yet no one will believe me when I tell them so."

"I can very readily believe it," said Tom, gravely. Then he lapsed into an ominous silence.

"I—I did not know that I was looking any worse now than when I first came to Pincote;" she said at last.

"You seem to me to be much older-looking, much more careworn, with lines making their appearance round your eyes and mouth, such as I never noticed before. So, at least, it strikes me, but I may be, and I dare say I am, quite wrong."

The widow seemed at a loss what to say. Tom's words had evidently rendered her very uneasy. "Then what would you advise me to do?" she said, after a time. "If you can detect the disease so readily, you should have no difficulty in specifying the remedy."

"Ah, now I am afraid you are getting beyond my depth," said Tom, with a smile. "I am little more than a theorizer, you know; but I should have no hesitation in saying that your disorder is connected with the mind."

"Gracious me, Mr. Bristow!"

"Yes, Mrs. McDermott, my opinion is that you are suffering from an undue development of brain power."

The widow looked puzzled. "I was always considered rather intellectual," she said, with a glance at her brother. But the Squire still slept.

"You are very intellectual, madam; and that is just where the evil lies."

"Excuse me, but I fail to follow you."

"You are gifted with a very large and a very powerful brain," said Tom, with the utmost gravity. The Squire snorted suddenly in his sleep. The widow held up a warning finger. There was silence in the room till the Squire's gentle long-drawn snores announced that he was again happily fast asleep.

"Very few of us are so specially gifted," resumed Tom. "But every special gift necessitates a special obligation in return. You, with your massive brain, must find that brain plenty of work to do—a sufficiency of con-

genial employment—otherwise it will inevitably turn upon itself, grow morbid and hypochondriacal, and slowly but surely deteriorate, till it ends by becoming—what I hardly like to say."

"Really, Mr. Bristow, this conversation is to me most interesting," said the widow. "Your views are thoroughly original, but, at the same time, I feel that they are perfectly correct."

"The sphere of your intellectual activity is far too narrow and confined," resumed Tom; "your brain has not sufficient pabulum to keep it in a state of healthy activity. You want to mix more with the world—to mix more with clever people like yourself. It was never intended by nature that you should lose yourself among the narrow coteries of provincial life: the metropolis claims you: the world at large claims you. A conversationalist so brilliant, so incisive, with such an exhaustless fund of new ideas, can only hope to find her equals among the best circles of London or Parisian society."

"How thoroughly you appreciate me, Mr. Bristow!" said the widow, all in a flutter of gratified vanity, as she edged her chair still closer to Tom. "It is as you say. I feel that I am lost here—that I am altogether out of my element. I stay here more as a matter of duty—of principle—than of anything else. Not that it is any gratification to me, as you may well imagine, to be buried alive in this dull hole. But my brother is getting old and infirm—breaking fast, I'm afraid, poor man," here the Squire gave a louder snore than common; "while Jane is little more than a foolish girl. They both need the guidance of a kind but firm hand. The interests of both demand a clear brain to look after them."

"My dear madam, I agree with you in toto. Your Spartan views with regard to the duties of every-day life are mine exactly. But we must not forget that we have still another duty—that of carefully preserving our health, especially when our lives are invaluable to the epoch in which we live. You, my

dear madam, are killing yourself by inches."

"Oh, Mr. Bristow, not quite so bad as that, I hope!"

"What I say, I say advisedly. I think that, without difficulty, I can specify a few symptoms of the cerebral disorder to which you are a victim. You will bear me out if what I say is correct."

"Yes, yes; please go on."

"You are a sufferer from sleeplessness to a certain extent. The body would fain rest, being tired and worn out, but the active brain will not allow it to do so. Am I right, Mrs. McDermott?"

"I cannot dispute the accuracy of what you say."

"Your nature being large and eminently sympathetic, but not finding sufficient vent for itself in the narrow circle to which it is condemned, busies itself, for lack of other aliment, with the concerns and daily doings of those around it, giving them the benefit of its vast experience and intuitive good sense;

but being met sometimes with coldness instead of sympathy, it collapses, falls back upon itself, and becomes morbid for want of proper intellectual companionship. May I hope that you follow me ?"

"Yes—yes, perfectly," said the widow, but looking somewhat mystified, notwithstanding.

"The brain thus thrown back upon itself engenders an irritability of the nerves, which is altogether abnormal. Fits of peevishness, of ill-temper, of causeless fault-finding, gradually supervene, till at length all natural amiability of disposition vanishes entirely, and there is nothing left but a wretched hypochondriac, a misery to himself and all around him."

"Gracious me! Mr. Bristow, what a picture! But I hope you do not put me down as a misery to myself and all around me."

"Far from it—very far from it—my dear Mrs. McDermott. You are only in the premonitory stage at present. Let us hope that in your case, the later stages will not follow."

"I hope not, with all my heart."

"Of course, you have not yet been troubled with hearing voices?"

"Hearing voices! Whatever do you mean, Mr. Bristow?"

"One of the worst symptoms of the cerebral disorder, from the earlier stages of which you are now suffering, is that the patient hears voices—or fancies that he hears them, which is pretty much the same thing. Sometimes they are strange voices; sometimes they are the voices of relatives, or friends, no longer among the living. In short, to state the case as briefly as possible, the patient is haunted."

"I declare, Mr. Bristow, that you quite frighten me!"

"But there are no such symptoms as these about you at present, Mrs. McDermott. The moment you have the least experience of them —should such a misfortune ever overtake you —then take my advice, and seek the only remedy that can be of any real benefit to you."

"And what may that be?"

"Immediate change of scene—a change

total and complete. Go abroad. Go to Italy; go to Egypt; go to Africa;—in short to any place where the change is a radical one. But I hope that in your case, such a necessity will never arise."

"All this is most deeply interesting to me, Mr. Bristow, but at the same time it makes me very nervous. The very thought of being haunted in the way you mention is enough to keep me from sleeping for a week."

At this moment Jane came into the room, and a few minutes later the Squire awoke. Tom had said all that he wanted to say, and he gave Mrs. McDermott no further opportunity for private conversation with him.

Next day, too, Tom carefully avoided the widow. His object was to afford her ample time to think over what he had said. That day the vicar and his wife dined at Pincote, and Tom became immersed in local politics with the Squire and the Parson. Mrs. McDermott was anxious and uneasy. That evening she talked less than she had ever been known to do before.

The rule at Pincote was to keep early hours. It was not much past ten o'clock when Mrs. McDermott left the drawing-room, and having obtained her bed candle, set out on her journey to her own room. Half way up the staircase stood Mr. Bristow. The night being warm and balmy for the time of year, the staircase window was still half open, and Tom stood there, gazing out into the moonlit garden. Mrs. McDermott stopped, and said a few gracious words to him. She would have liked to resume the conversation of the previous evening, but that was evidently neither the time nor the place to do so; so she said good-night, shook hands, and went on her way, leaving Tom still standing by the window. Higher up, close to the head of the stairs, stood a very large, old-fashioned case clock. As she was passing it Mrs. McDermott held up her candle to see the time. It was nearly twenty minutes past ten. But at the very moment of her noting this fact, there came three distinct taps from the inside of the case, and next instant from the same place came

the sound of a hollow, ghost-like voice. "Fanny—Fanny—list! I want to speak to you," said the voice, in slow, solemn tones. But Mrs. McDermott did not wait to hear more. She screamed, dropped her candle, and staggered back against the opposite wall. Tom was by her side in a moment.

"My dear Mrs. McDermott, whatever is the matter?" he said.

"The voice! did you not hear the voice!" she gasped.

"What voice? whose voice?" said Tom, with an arm round her waist.

"A voice which spoke to me out of the clock!" she said, with a shiver.

"Out of the clock?" said Tom. "We can soon see whether anybody's hidden there." Speaking thus, he withdrew his arm, and flung open the door of the clock. Enough light came from the lamp on the stairs to show that the old case was empty of everything, save the weights, chains, and pendulum of the clock.

"Wherever else the voice may have come from, it is plain that it couldn't come from

here," said Tom, as he proceeded to relight the widow's candle.

"It came from there, I'm quite certain. There were three distinct raps from the inside as well."

"Is it not possible that it may have been a mere hallucination on your part? You have not been well, you know, for some time past."

"Whatever it may have been, it was very terrible," said Mrs. McDermott, drawing her skirts round her with a shudder. "I have not forgotten what you told me yesterday."

"Allow me to accompany you as far as your room door," said Tom.

"Thanks. I shall feel obliged by your doing so. You will say nothing of all this downstairs?"

"I should not think of doing so."

The following day Mr. Bristow was not at luncheon. There were one or two inquiries, but no one seemed to know exactly what had become of him. It was Mrs. McDermott's usual practice to retire to the library for an

hour after luncheon—which room she generally had all to herself at such times—for the ostensible purpose of reading the newspapers, but, it may be, quite as much for the sake of a quiet sleep in the huge leathern chair that stood by the library fire. On going there as usual after luncheon to-day, what was the widow's surprise to find Mr. Bristow sitting there fast asleep, with the "Times" at his feet where it had dropped from his relaxed fingers.

She stepped up to him on tiptoe and looked closely at him. "Rather nice-looking," she said to herself. "Shall I disturb him, or not?"

Her eyes caught sight of some written documents lying out-spread on the table a little distance away. The temptation was too much for her. Still on tiptoe, she crossed to the table in order to examine them. But hardly had she stooped over the table when the same hollow voice that had sounded in her ears the previous night spoke to her again, and froze her to the spot where she was

standing. "Fanny McDermott, you must get away from this house," said the voice. "If you stop here you will be a dead woman in three months!"

She was too terrified to look round or even to stir, but her trembling lips did at last falter out the words: "Who are you?"

The answer came. "I am your husband, Geoffrey. Be warned in time."

Then there was silence, and in a minute or two the widow ventured to look round. There was no one there except Mr. Bristow, fast asleep. She managed to reach the door without disturbing him, and from thence made the best of her way to her own room.

Two hours later Tom was encountered by the Squire. The latter was one broad smile. "She's going at last," he said. "Off to-morrow like a shot. Just told me."

"Then, with your permission, I won't dine with you this evening. I don't want to see her again."

"But how on earth have you managed it?" asked the Squire.

"By means of a little simple ventriloquism —nothing more. But I see her coming this way. I'm off." And off he went, leaving the Squire staring after him in open-mouthed astonishment.

CHAPTER VIII.

DIRTY JACK.

THERE was one thing that puzzled both General St. George and Lionel Dering, and that was the persistent way in which Kester St. George stayed on at Park Newton. It had, in the first place, been a matter of some difficulty to get him to Park Newton at all, and for some time after his arrival it had been evident to all concerned that he had made up his mind that his stay there should be as brief as possible. But after that never-to-be-forgotten night when the noise of ghostly footsteps was heard in the nailed-up room—a circumstance which both his uncle and his cousin had made up their minds would drive him from the house

man, they would really. Which way are you going back?"

Kester hesitated a moment. Should he quarrel with this man and set him at defiance, or should he not? Could he afford to quarrel with him? that was the question. Perhaps it would be as well to keep from doing so as long as possible.

"I'm going to walk back across the moor as far as Sedgeley," said Kester.

"Then I'll walk with you—though three miles is rather a big stretch to do with my game leg. I can get a gig from there that will take me home."

Kester shrugged his shoulders, but made no comment. Skeggs took up his hat and stick, and proceeded to polish the former article with his sleeve.

"Queer woman that," he said, with a jerk of his thumb towards the bed—"very queer. Hard as nails. With something heroic about her, to my mind—something that, under different circumstances, might have developed her into a remarkable woman. Well, that's

the way with heaps of us. Circumstances are dead against us, and we are not strong enough to overmaster them; else should we smite the world with surprise, and genius would not be so scarce an article in the market as it is now."

Kester stared. Was this the half-drunken blackguard who had been jeering at him but two minutes ago? "And yet, drunk he must be," added Kester to himself. "No fellow in his senses would talk such precious rot."

"Your obedient servant, sir," said Skeggs, with a purposely exaggerated bow as he held open the door for Mr. St. George to pass out.

The girl was still sitting on the wall with her skirt drawn over her head. Kester went up to her. "I will send some one along first thing to-morrow morning to see to the funeral and other matters," he said, "if you can manage till then."

"Oh, I can manage right enough. Why not?" said the girl.

"I thought that perhaps you might not care to be in the house by yourself all night."

"Oh, I don't mind that."

"Then you are not afraid?"

"What's there to be frittened of? She's quiet enough now. I shall make up a jolly fire, and have a jolly supper, and then a jolly long sleep. And that's what I've not had for weeks. And I shall read the Dream Book. She can't keep that from me now. I know where it is. It's in the bed right under her. But I'll have it." She laughed and nodded her head, then putting a nut into her mouth she cracked it and began to pick out the kernel. Kester turned away.

"Nell, my good girl," said Mr. Skeggs, insinuatingly, "just see whether there isn't such a thing as a drop of whiskey somewhere about the house. I've an awful pain in my chest."

"There's no whiskey—not a drop—but I know where there's half a bottle of gin. Give me five shillings and I'll fetch it."

"Five shillings for half a bottle of gin! Why, Nell, what a greedy young pig you must be!"

"Don't have it then. Nobody axed you. I can drink it myself."

"I'll give you three shillings for it. Come now."

"Not a meg less than five will I take," said Nell, emphatically, as she cracked another nut.

"Why, you young viper, have you no conscience at all?" he cried savagely. Then seeing that Nell took no further notice of him, he turned to Kester. "I find that I have no loose silver about me," he said. "Oblige me with the loan of a couple of half-crowns till we get to Sedgeley." Whenever Mr. Skeggs made a new acquaintance he always requested the loan of a couple of half-crowns before parting from him. But the half-crowns were never paid back until asked for, and asked for more than once.

A few premonitory flakes of snow were darkening the air as Kester St. George and Mr. Skeggs started on their way back across Burley Moor, the latter with a thick comforter round his neck and the bottle of gin

stowed carefully away in the tail pocket of his coat. The cold seemed more intense than ever, but the wind had fallen altogether.

"We are going to have a rough night," said Skeggs as he stepped sturdily out. "We must contrive to get across the moor before the snow comes down very thick, or we shall stand a good chance of losing our way. Only the winter before last a pedlar and his wife were lost in the snow within a mile of here, and their bodies not found for a fortnight. This sudden change will play the devil with the young crops."

Kester did not answer. Far different matters occupied his thoughts. In silence they walked on for a little while.

"I suppose you could give a pretty good guess," said Skeggs at length, "at my reasons for asking you which way you were going to walk this afternoon?"

"Indeed, no," said Kester with a shrug. "I have not the remotest idea, nor do I care to know. It was you who chose to accom-

pany me. I did not thrust my company upon you."

Skeggs laughed a little maliciously. "I don't think there's much good, Mr. Kester St. George, in you and I beating about the bush. I'm a plain man of business, and that reminds me,"—interrupting himself with a chuckle—"that when I once used those very words to a client of mine, he retorted by saying, 'You are more than a plain man of business, Mr. Skeggs, you are an ugly one.' I did my very utmost for that man, but he was hanged. Mais revenons. I am a plain man of business, and I intend to deal with this question in a business-like way. The simple point is: What is it worth your while to give me for the document I have buttoned up here?" tapping his chest with his left hand as he spoke.

"I am at a loss to know to what document you refer," said Mr. St. George, coldly.

"A very few words will tell you the contents of it, though, if I am rightly informed, you can give a pretty good guess already as to what they are likely to be. In this

document it is asserted that you, sir, have no right to the name by which the world has known you for so long a time—that you have no right to the position you occupy, to the property you claim as yours. That you are, in fact, none other than the son of Mother Mim herself—of the woman who lies dead in yonder hut."

Kester drew in his breath with something like a sigh. It was as he had feared. Mother Mim had told everything, and, of all people in the world, to the wretch now walking by his side. He braced his nerves for the coming encounter. "I have heard something before to-day of the rigmarole of which you speak," he said, haughtily; "but I need hardly tell you that the affair is nothing but a tissue of vilest lies from beginning to end."

"I dare say it is," said Skeggs, good humouredly. "But it may be rather difficult for you to prove that it is so."

"It will be still more difficult for you to prove that it is not so."

"Oh! I am quite aware of all the diffi-

culties both for and against—no man more so. You have got possession, and a hundred other points in your favour. Still, with what evidence I have already, and with what evidence I can get elsewhere, I shall be able to make out a strong case—a very strong case against you in a court of justice."

"Evidence elsewhere!" said Kester, disdainfully. "There is no such thing, unless you are clever enough to make the dead speak."

"Even that has been done before now," said Skeggs quietly. "But in this case we have no need to go to the churchyard to collect our evidence. I have a living, breathing witness whom I can lay my hands on at a day's notice."

"You lie," said Kester, emphatically.

"I'll wash that down," said Skeggs, halting for a moment and proceeding to take a good pull at his bottle of gin. "If you so far forget yourself again, I shall begin to feel sure that you are not a St. George. What I told you was not a lie. There were four wit-

nesses who had all a personal knowledge of a certain fact. Three of those witnesses are dead: the fourth still lives. Of the existence of this fourth witness Mother Mim never even hinted to you. It was her trump card, and she was far too cunning to let you see it."

Kester walked on in silence. He felt that just then he had hardly a word to say. Was all that he had sacrificed so much for in other ways, all that he had run such tremendous risks for, to be torn from him by the machinations of a vile old hag, and the drunken, ribald scoundrel by his side? Through what strange ambushes, through what dusky by-paths, doth Fate oft-times overtake us! We look back along the broad highway we have been traversing, and seeing no black shadow dogging our footsteps, we go rejoicing on our way; when suddenly, from some near-at-hand shrub, is shot a poisoned arrow, and the sunlight fades from our eyes for ever.

"And now, after this little skirmish," said Skeggs, "we come back to my first question:

What can you afford to give me for the document in my pocket?"

"Suppose I say that I will give you nothing—what then?" said Kester, sullenly.

"Then I shall get my evidence together, work out my case on paper, and submit it to the heir-at-law."

"And supposing the heir-at-law, acting under advice, were to decline having anything to do with your case, as you call it?"

"He would be a fool to do that, because my case is anything but a weak one. I tell you this in confidence. But supposing he were to decline, then I should say to him: 'I am willing to conduct this case on my own account. If I fail, it shall not cost you a penny. If I succeed, you shall pay all expenses, and give me five thousand pounds.' That would fetch him, I think."

"You have been assuming all along," said Kester, "that your case is based on fact. I assure you again that it is not—that it is nothing but a devilish lie from beginning to end."

"Really, my dear sir, that has little or nothing to do with the matter. I dare say it is a lie. But it is my place to believe it to be the truth, and to make other people believe the same as I do. Here's your very good health, sir." Again Mr. Skeggs took a long pull and a strong pull at his bottle of gin.

"Knowing what you know," said Kester, "and believing what you believe, are you yet willing to sell the document now in your possession?"

"Of course I am. What else is all this jaw for?"

"And don't you think you are a pretty sort of scoundrel to make me any such offer? Don't you think——"

"Now look you here, Mr. St. George—if that is your name, which I very much doubt—don't let you and me begin to fling mud at one another, because that is a game at which I could lick you into fits. I have made you a fair offer. If we can't come to terms, there's no reason why we shouldn't part friendly."

Once again Kester walked on in silence. The snow had been coming down more thickly for some time past, and already the dull gray moor began to look strange and unfamiliar, but neither of the two men gave more than a passing thought to the weather.

"If you feel and know your case to be such a strong one," said Kester, at last, "why do you come to me at all? Why send a white flag into your enemy's camp? Why not fight him à l'outrance at once?"

"Because I'm neither so young nor so pugnacious as I once was," answered Skeggs. "I go in for peace and quiet nowadays. I don't want the bother and annoyance of a law-suit. I have no ill-feeling towards you, and if you will only make me a fair offer, I shall be the last man in the world to disturb you in any way. Gemini! how the snow comes down! We are only about half way yet. We shall have some difficulty in picking our road across."

"I myself am as anxious as you can be, Mr. Skeggs, to be saved the trouble and annoy-

ance of a law-suit, however sure I may feel that the result would be in my favour. But you must give me a little time to think this matter over. It is far too important to be decided at a moment's notice."

"Time? To be sure. You can make up your mind in about a couple of days, I suppose. Shall I call upon you, or will you call upon me?"

Hardly were the words out of Mr. Skeggs's mouth when his wooden leg sunk suddenly into a hidden hole in the pathway. Thrown forward by the shock, the lawyer came heavily to the ground, and at the same moment his leg snapped short off just below the knee.

Kester took him by the shoulders and assisted him to assume a sitting posture on the footpath.

Mr. Skeggs's first action was to pick up his broken limb and look at it with a sort of comical despair. "There goes a friend that has done me good service," he said; "but he might have lasted till he got me home, for all

that. How the deuce am I to get home?" he asked, turning abruptly to Kester.

Kester paused for a minute and looked round before answering. The snow was coming down faster than ever. The moor was being gradually turned into a huge white carpet. Already its zig-zag paths and winding footways were barely distinguishable from the treacherous bog which lay on every side of them. In an hour and a half it would be dark with a darkness that would be unrelieved by either moon or stars. If it kept on snowing all night at this rate the drift would be a couple of feet deep by morning. Skeggs's casual remark about the pedlar and his wife, unheeded at the time, now flashed vividly across Kester's mind.

"You will have to wait here till I can get assistance," he said, in answer to his companion's question. "There is no help for it."

"I suppose not," growled Skeggs. "Was ever anything so cursedly unfortunate?"

"Sedgeley is the nearest place to this," said Kester. "There are plenty of men there who

know the moor thoroughly. I will send half a dozen of them to your help."

"How soon may I expect them here?"

"In about three-quarters of an hour from now."

"Ugh! I'm half frozen already. What shall I be in another hour?"

"Oh, you'll pull through that easily enough. Your bottle is not empty yet."

"Jove! I'd forgotten the bottle," said Skeggs, with animation.

He took it out of his pocket, and held it up to the light. "Not more than a quartern left. Well, that's better than none at all."

"Good-bye," said Kester, as he shook some of the snow off his hat. "You may look for help in less than an hour."

"Good-bye, Mr. St. George," said Skeggs, looking very earnestly at him as he did so. "You won't forget to send the help, will you? because if you do forget, it will be nothing more nor less than wilful murder."

Kester laughed a short grating laugh. "Fear nothing, Skeggs," he said. "I won't

forget. About that other trifle, I will write you in two or three days. Again good-bye."

Skeggs's face had turned very white. He could not speak. He took off his hat and waved it. Kester responded by a wave of his hand. Then turning on his heel he strode away through the snowy twilight. In three minutes he was lost to sight. Skeggs could no longer see him. Tears came into his eyes. "He'll send no help, not he. I shall die here like a dog. The snow will be my winding-sheet. If ever there was mischief in a man's eye, there was in his, as he bade me good-bye."

Onward strode Kester St. George through the blinding snow. Altogether heedless of the weather was he just now. He had other things to think about. As instinctively as an Indian or a backwoodsman tracks his way across prairie or forest did he track his way across the moor, all hidden though the paths now were. He was a child of the moor. He had learned its secrets when a boy, and in his present emergency, reason and intellect must

for ever—he ceased to talk much about going away. Week passed after week and still he stayed on. Nor could his uncle, had he been desirous of doing so, which he certainly was not, have hinted to him, even in the most delicate possible way, that his room would be more welcome than his company, after the pressure which he had put upon him only a short time previously to induce him to remain.

Nothing could have suited Lionel's plans better than that his cousin should continue to live on at Park Newton, but he was certainly puzzled to know what his reason could be for so doing; and, in such a case, to be puzzled was, to a certain extent, to be disquieted.

But much as he would have liked to do so, Kester had a very good reason for not leaving Park Newton at present. He was, in fact, afraid to do so. After the affair of the footsteps he had decided that it would not be advisable to go away for a little while. It would never do for people to say that he had been driven away by the ghost of Percy

Osmond. It was while thus lingering on from day to day that he had ridden over to see Mother Mim. One result of his interview was that he felt how utterly unsafe it would be for him to quit the neighbourhood till she was safely dead and buried. She might send for him at any moment, she might have other things to speak to him about which it behoved him to hear. She might change her mind at the last moment, and decide to tell to some other person what she had already told him; and when she should die, it would doubtless be to him that application would be made to bury her. All things considered, it was certainly unadvisable that he should leave Park Newton yet awhile.

Day after day he waited with smothered impatience for some further tidings of Mother Mim. But day after day he waited in vain. Most men, under such circumstances, would have gone to the place and have made personal inquiries for themselves. This was precisely what Kester St. George told himself that he ought to do, but for all that he did

not do it. He shrank, with a repugnance which he could not overcome, from the thought of any further contact with either Mother Mim or her surroundings. His tastes, if not refined, were fastidious, and a shudder of disgust ran through him as often as he remembered that if what Mother Mim had said were true—and there was something that rang terribly like truth in her words—then was she—that wretched creature—his mother, and the filthy hut in which she lay dying his sole home and heritage. He knew that for the sake of his own interest—of his own safety—he ought to go and see again this woman who called herself his mother, but three weeks had come and gone before he could screw his courage up to the pitch requisite to induce him to do so.

But before this came about, Kester St. George had been left for the time being, with the exception of certain servants, the sole occupant of Park Newton. Lionel Dering had gone down to Bath to seek an interview with Pierre Janvard, with what result has

been already seen. Two days after Lionel's departure, General St. George was called away by the sudden illness of an old Indian friend to whom he was most warmly attached. He left home expecting to be back in four or five days at the latest; whereas, as it fell out, he did not reach home again for several weeks.

It was one day when thus left alone, and when the solitude was becoming utterly intolerable to him, that Kester made up his mind that he would no longer be a coward, but would go that very afternoon and see for himself whether Mother Mim were alive or dead. But even after he had thus determined that there should be no more delay on his part, he played fast and loose with himself as to whether he should go or not. Had there come to him any important letter or telegram demanding his presence fifty miles away, he would have caught at it as a drowning man catches at a straw. The veriest excuse would have sufficed for the putting off of his journey for at least one day. But the

dull hours wore themselves away without relief or change of any kind for him, and when three o'clock came, having first dosed himself heavily with brandy, he rang the bell and ordered his horse to be brought round.

What might not the next few hours bring to him? he asked himself as he rode down the avenue. They might perchance be pregnant with doom. Or death might already have lifted this last bitter burden from his life by sealing with his bony fingers the only lips that had power to do him harm.

For nearly a fortnight past the weather had been remarkably mild, balmy, and open for the time of year. Everybody said how easily old winter was dying. But during the previous night there had come a bitter change. The wind had suddenly veered round to the north-east, and was still blowing steadily from that quarter. Steadily and bitterly it blew, chilling the hearts of man and beast with its icy breath, stopping the growth of grass and flowers, killing every faintest gleam

of sunshine, and bringing back the reign of winter in its cruellest form.

Heavy and lowering looked the sky, shrilly through the still bare branches whistled the ice-cold wind, as Kester St. George, deep in thought, rode slowly through the park. He buttoned his coat more closely around him, and pulled his hat more firmly over his brows as he turned out of the lodge gates, and setting his face full to the wind, urged his horse into a gallop, and was quickly lost to view down the winding road.

It would not have taken him long to reach the edge of Burley Moor had not his horse suddenly fallen lame. For the last two miles of the distance his pace was reduced to a slow walk. This so annoyed Kester that he decided to leave his horse at a road-side tavern in the last hamlet he had to pass through, and to traverse the remainder of the distance on foot. A short three miles across the moor would take him to Mother Mim's cottage.

To a man such as Kester a three miles' walk was a rather formidable undertaking—

or, at least, it was an uncommon one. But there was no avoiding it on the present occasion, unless he gave up the object of his journey and went back home. But he could by no means bear the thought of doing that. In proportion with the hesitation and reluctance which he had previously shown, to ascertain either the best or the worst of the affair, was the anxiety which now possessed him to reach his journey's end. His imagination pictured all kinds of possible and impossible evils as likely to accrue to him, and he cursed himself again and again for his negligence in not making the journey long ago.

Very bleak and cold was that walk across the desolate, lonely moor, but Kester St. George, buried in his own thoughts, hardly felt or heeded anything of it. All the sky was clouded and overcast, but far away to the north a still darker bank of cloud was creeping slowly up from the horizon.

The wind blew in hollow fitful gusts. Any one learned in such lore would have said that a change of weather was imminent.

When about half-way across the moor he halted for a moment to gather breath. On every side of him spread the dull treeless expanse. Nowhere was there another human being to be seen. He was utterly alone. "If a man crossing here were suddenly stricken with death," he muttered to himself, "what a place this would be to die in! His body might lie here for days—for weeks even—before it was found."

At length Mother Mim's cottage was reached. Everything about it looked precisely the same as when he had seen it last. It seemed only like a few hours since he had left it. There, too, crouched on the low wall outside, with her skirt drawn over her head, was Mother Mim's grand-daughter, the girl with the black glittering eyes, looking as if she had never stirred from the spot since he was last there. She made no movement or sign of recognition when he walked up to her, but her eyes were full of a cold keen criticism of him, far beyond her age and appearance.

"How is your grandmother?" said Kester,

abruptly. He did not like being stared at as she stared at him.

"She's dead."

"Dead!" It was no more than he expected to hear, and yet he could not hear it altogether unmoved.

"Ay, as dead as a door nail. And a good job too. It was time she went."

"How long has she been dead?" asked Kester, ignoring the latter part of the girl's speech.

"Just half an hour."

Another surprise for Kester. He had expected to hear that she had been dead several days—a week perhaps. But only half an hour!

"Who was with her when she died?" he asked, after a minute's pause.

"Me and Dirty Jack."

"Dirty Jack! who is he?"

"Why Dirty Jack. Everybody knows him. He lives in Duxley, and has a wooden leg, and does writings for folk."

"Does writings for folk!" A shiver ran

through Kester. "And has he been doing anything for your grandmother?"

"That he has. A lot."

"A lot—about what?"

"About you."

"About me? Why about me?"

"Oh, you never came near. Nobody never came near. Granny got tired of it. 'I'll have my revenge,' said she. So she sent for Dirty Jack, and he took it all down in writing."

"Took it all down in writing about me?"

She nodded her head in the affirmative.

"If you know so much, no doubt you know what it was that he took down—eh?"

"Oh, I know right enough."

"Why not tell me?"

"I know all about it, but I ain't a-going to split."

Further persuasion on Kester's part had no other effect than to induce the girl to assert in still more emphatic terms that "she wasn't a-going to split."

Evidently nothing more was to be got from

her. But she had said enough already to confirm his worst fears. Mother Mim, out of spite for the neglect with which he had treated her, had made a confession at the last moment, similar in purport to what she had told him when last there. Such a confession —if not absolutely dangerous to him—she having assured him that none of the witnesses were now living—might be made a source of infinite annoyance to him. Such a story, once made public, might bring forth witnesses and evidence from twenty hitherto unsuspected quarters, and fetter him round, link by link, with a chain of evidence from which he might find it impossible to extricate himself. At every sacrifice, Mother Mim's confession must be destroyed or suppressed. Such were some of the thoughts that passed through Kester's mind as he stood there biting his nails. Again and again he cursed himself in that he had allowed any such confession to emanate from the dead woman, whose silence a little extra kindness on his part would have effectually secured.

"And where is this Dirty Jack, as you call him?" he said, at last.

"He's in there"—indicating the hut with a jerk of her head—"fast asleep."

"Fast asleep in the same room with your grandmother?"

"Why not? He had a bottle of whiskey with him which he kept sucking at. At last he got half screwy, and when all was over he said he would have a snooze by the fire and pull himself together a bit before going home."

Kester said no more, but going up to the hut, opened the door and went in. On the pallet at the farther end lay the dead woman, her body faintly outlined through the sheet that had been drawn over her. A clear fire was burning in the broken grate, and close to it, on the only chair in the place, sat a man fast asleep. His hands were grimy, his linen was yellow, his hair was frowsy. He was a big bulky man, with a coarse, hard face, and was dressed in faded threadbare black. He had a wooden leg, which just now was thrust

out towards the fire, and seemed as if it were basking in the comfortable blaze.

On the chimney-piece was an empty spirit-bottle, and in a corner near at hand were deposited a broad-brimmed hat, greasy and much the worse for wear, and a formidable looking walking-stick.

Such was the vision of loveliness that met the gaze of Kester St. George as he paused for a moment or two just inside the cottage door. Then he coughed and advanced a step or two. As he did so the man suddenly opened his eyes, got up quickly but awkwardly out of his chair, and laid his hand on something that was hidden in an inner pocket of his coat. "No, you don't!" he cried, with a wave of his hand. "No, you don't! None of your hanky-panky tricks here. They won't go down with Jack Skeggs, so you needn't try 'em on!"

Kester stared at him in unconcealed disgust. It was evident that he was still under the partial influence of what he had been drinking.

"Who are you, sir, and what are you doing here?" asked Kester, sternly.

"I am John Skeggs, Esquire, attorney-at-law, at your service. And who may you be, when you're at home? But there—I know who you are well enough. You are Mr. Kester St. George, of Park Newton. I have seen you before. I saw you on the day of the murder trial. You were one of the witnesses, and white enough you looked. Anybody who had a good look at you in the box that day would never be likely to forget your face again."

Kester turned aside for a moment to hide the sudden nervous twitching of his lips.

"I'm sorry the whiskey is done," said Mr. Skeggs with a regretful look at the empty bottle. "I should like you and I to have had a drain together. I suppose you don't do anything in this line?" From one pocket he produced an old clasp knife, and from the other a cake of leaf tobacco. Then he cut himself a plug and put it into his mouth. "When one friend fails me, then I fall back

upon another," he said. "When I can't get whiskey I must have tobacco."

There was no better known character in Duxley than Mr. Skeggs. "Dirty Jack," or "Drunken Jack," were the sobriquets by which he was generally known, and neither of those terms was applied to him without good and sufficient reason. There could be no doubt as to the man's shrewdness, ability, and knowledge of common law. He was a great favourite among the lower and the very lowest classes of Duxley society, who in their legal difficulties never thought of employing any other lawyer than Skeggs, the universal belief being that if anybody could pull them through, either by hook or crook, Dirty Jack was that man. And it is quite possible that Mr. Skeggs's clients were not far wrong in their belief.

"No good stopping here any longer," said Skeggs, when he had put back his knife and tobacco into his pocket.

"No, I suppose not," said Kester.

"I suppose you will see that everything is

done right and proper by our poor dear departed?"

"Yes, I suppose there is no one to look to but me. She was my foster-mother, and very kind to me when I was a lad."

"His foster-mother! Listen to that! His foster-mother! ha! ha!" sniggered Dirty Jack. Then laying a finger on one side his nose, and leering up at Kester with horrible familiarity, he added: "We know all about that little affair, Mr. St. George, and a very pretty romance it is."

"Look you here, Mr. Skeggs, or whatever your dirty name may be," said Kester, sternly, "I'd advise you to keep a civil tongue in your head or it may be worse for you. I've thrashed bigger men than you in my time. Be careful, or I shall thrash you."

"I like your pluck, on my soul I do!" said Skeggs, heartily. "If you're not genuine silver—and you know you ain't—you're a deuced good imitation of the real thing. Thoroughly well plated, that's what you are. Any one would take you to be a born gentle-

perforce give way to that blind instinct which was left him as a legacy of his youth.

At length the last patch of moorland was crossed, and a few minutes later he found himself close by a well-remembered finger-post, where three roads met. One of these roads led to Sedgeley, which was but a short quarter of a mile away; another of them led to Duxley and Park Newton. At Sedgeley his horse was waiting for him. There, too, was to be had the help which he had so faithfully promised Skeggs that he would send. Leaning against the finger-post, he took a minute's rest before going any farther. Which road should he take? That was the question which at present he was turning over and over in his mind. Not long did he hesitate. Taking out his pocket-handkerchief, he made a wisp of it, and tied it round his throat. Then he turned up the collar of his coat. Then once again he shook the snow off his hat. Then plunging his hands deep in his pockets, and turning his back on the finger-post, he set out resolutely along the road that led towards Park Newton.

Once, and once only did he pause, even for a moment, before reaching home. It was when he fancied that he heard, away in the far distance, a low, wild, melancholy cry—whether the cry of an animal or a man he could not tell—but none the less a cry for help. Whatever it was, it did not come again, and after that Kester pursued his way homeward steadily and without pause. It was quite dark long before he reached his own room.

He changed his clothes and went down to dinner. Both his uncle and Richard Dering were away, and he dined alone, for which he was by no means sorry. Every half-hour or so he inquired as to the weather. They had nothing to tell him except that it was still snowing hard. The evening was one of slow torture, but at length it wore itself away. He went to bed about midnight. Dobbs's last report to him was that the weather was still unchanged. But several times during the night Dobbs heard his master pacing up and down his room, and had he been there he might, ever and again, have seen a haggard

face peering out with eager eyes into the darkness.

"Twelve inches of snow, sir, on the drive," was Dobbs's first news next morning. "They say there has not been a fall like it in these parts for a dozen years."

The snow had ceased to fall hours before. By-and-by there came a few gleams of sunshine to brighten the scene, but the wind was still in the north, and all that day the weather kept bitterly cold. Soon after sunset, however, there was a change. Little by little the wind got round to the south-west. At ten o'clock Dobbs reported: "Snow going fast, sir. Regular thaw. Not be a bit left by breakfast-time."

"Call me at four," said his master, "and have some coffee ready, and a horse brought round by four thirty."

He was quite tired out by this time, and when he went to bed he felt sure that he should have four or five hours' sound sleep. But his sleep was several times disturbed by a strange dream: always the same thing re-

peated over and over again. He dreamt that he was standing under the finger-post on the edge of the moor. But the finger-post was neither more nor less than a gigantic skeleton, of which the outstretched arms formed the direction boards. On the bony palm of one outstretched arm, in letters of blood, was written the words: "To Sedgeley." Then as he read the words in his dream, again would sound in his ears the low, weird, melancholy cry which had arrested his steps for a moment as he walked home through the snow, and hearing the cry he would start up in bed and stare round him, and wonder for a moment where he was.

Dobbs duly called his master at four, and at four thirty he mounted his horse and rode away. The roads were heavy and sloppy with the melting snow. The morning was intensely dark, but Kester knew the country thoroughly, and was never at a loss as to which turn he ought to take. Not one human being did he meet during the whole of his ride. But, indeed, his nearest friend

would have passed him by in the dark without recognition. He wore an old shooting suit, with a Glengarry bonnet and a macintosh, and had a thick shawl wrapped round his throat and the lower part of his face.

Day was just breaking as he reached the edge of the moor. He tethered his horse to the stump of an old tree behind a hedge. He had brought a powerful field-glass in his pocket. He scanned the moor carefully through it before proceeding farther on his quest. No living being was in sight anywhere. Satisfied of this, he set out without further delay, leaving his horse by itself to await his return. Not without a tremor—not without a faster beating of the heart—did he again set foot on the moor. A drizzling rain now began to fall, but Kester was not sorry for this. The worse the weather, the fewer the people who would be abroad in it. Onward he strode, keeping a wary eye about him as he went.

At length he reached a curve in the path from whence he ought to be able to discern

the bulky form of John Skeggs, Esq., if that gentleman was still where he had last seen him. He looked, but the morning was still heavy and dark: he could see nothing. Then he adjusted his glass, and looking through that he could just make out a heap—a bundle—a shapeless something. It required a powerful effort on his part to brace his nerves to the pitch requisite to carry him through the task he had still before him. He had filled a small flask with brandy, and he now drank some of it. Then he started again. A few minutes more and the end of his journey was reached.

There lay Skeggs, on the very spot where he had left him, resting on his side, with one hand under his head, as if asleep. His hat had fallen off. On the ground near him were the empty bottle, his walking-stick, and his broken wooden leg. Numbed by the intense cold, he had fallen asleep while waiting for the help which was never to come, and had so died, frozen to death. Doubtless his death had been a painless one, but none the

less, as he himself would have said, was Kester St. George his murderer.

Gloved though he was, it was not without a feeling of indescribable loathing that Kester could bring himself to touch the body. But it was absolutely necessary to do so. The paper he had come in quest of was in the breast pocket of the dead man's coat. It did not take him long to find it. Having made sure that he had got the right document, he fastened it up in the breast pocket of his own coat. "Now I am safe!" he said to himself. Then he took off his gloves and buried them carefully under a large stone. Then with one last glance at the body, he slunk hurriedly away, cursing in his heart the daylight that was now creeping up so rapidly from the east. In the clear light of dawn the foul deed he had done looked a thousand times fouler than it had looked before.

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT TO DO NEXT?

NOT to every one among the children of men is given the power, the faculty, to act as comforter to others. To listen to another's sorrow, to be told the history of another's trouble, is one thing: to be able to give back comfort is another. That delicate intuitive sympathy with another's woe which draws away the sting even while listening to it, which makes that woe its own property as it were, which sheds balm round the sufferer in every word and look and touch: this is surely as much a special gift as the gift of song or the poet's fine phrenzy, and without it the world would be a much poorer place than it is.

This rare gift of sympathy was possessed by Edith Dering in a pre-eminent degree. She was at once emotional and sympathetic. To Lionel in his dire trouble she was a comforter in the truest sense of the word. It was she who preserved his mental balance—the equipoise of his mind. But for her sweet offices he would have become a monomaniac or a misanthrope of the bitterest kind. Naturally she had him with her as much as possible, but still his home was of necessity at Park Newton. To the world he was simply Richard Dering, the unmarried nephew of General St. George. It would not do for him to be seen going to Fern Cottage sufficiently often to excite either scandal or suspicion. He could only visit there as the intimate friend of Mrs. Garside and her niece. Sometimes he took his uncle with him, sometimes Tom, in order to divert suspicion. For him to enter the garden gate of Fern Cottage was to cross the threshold of his earthly paradise. Edith and he had been married in the depth of a great trouble—troubles and danger had beset the

path of their wedded life ever since. Owing, perhaps, to that very cause week by week, and month by month, their love seemed only to grow in depth and intensity. As yet it had lost nothing of its pristine charm and freshness. The gold-dust of romance lingered about it still. They were man and wife, they had been man and wife for months, but to the world at large they seemed nothing more than ordinary friends.

But all Edith's care and watchful love could not lift her husband, except by fits and starts, out of those moods of gloom and depression which seemed to be settling more closely down upon him day by day. As link after link was added to the chain of evidence, each one tending to incriminate his cousin still more deeply, his moods seemed to grow darker and more difficult of removal. With his cousin Lionel associated no more than was absolutely necessary. They rarely met each other till dinner-time, and then they met with nothing more than a simple "How do you do?" and in conversation they never got

beyond some half-dozen of the barest commonplaces. Lionel always left the table as soon as the cloth was drawn.

On Kester's side there was no love lost. That dark, stern-faced cousin was a perpetual menace to him, and he hated him accordingly. He hated him for his likeness to his dead and gone brother. He hated him because of the look in his eyes—so coldly scrutinizing, so searching, so immovable. He hated him because it was a look that he could in nowise give back. Try as he might, he could not face Lionel's steady gaze.

For some two or three weeks after his return from Bath with Janvard's written confession, Lionel was perfectly quiescent. He took no further action whatever. He was, indeed, debating in his own mind what further action it behoved him to take. There was no need to seek for any further evidence, if, indeed, any more would have been forthcoming. All that he wanted he had now got; it was simply a question as to what use he should make of it. Day and night that was

the question which presented itself before his mind: what use should he make of the knowledge in his possession? His mind was divided this way and that; day passed after day, and still he could by no means decide as to the course which it would be best for him to adopt. Of all this he said not a word to Edith: he could not have borne to discuss the question even with her; but it is possible that she surmised something of it. She knew that she had only to wait and everything would be told her. Perhaps to Bristow, who knew all the details of the case as well as he did, he might have said something as to the difficulty by which he was beset, but as it happened, Tom was not at home just then. Much of his time was spent by Lionel in long solitary walks far and wide through the country. He could think better when he was walking than when sitting quietly at home, he used to say; and, indeed, the country folk who encountered him often turned to look at him, as he stalked along, with his eyes set straight before him, gazing

on vacancy, and with lips that moved rapidly as he whispered to himself of his dreadful secret.

But, little by little, the need of counsel, of sympathy, grew more strongly upon him. He was still as much at a loss as ever as to the step which he ought to take next.

"They shall decide for me," he said at last; "I will put myself into their hands: by their verdict I will abide."

General St. George at this time was away from Park Newton. As has been already stated, he had been summoned to the sick-bed of a very old and valued friend. The illness was a long and tedious one, and at the request of his friend the General stayed on and kept him company. Truth to tell, he was by no means sorry to get away from Park Newton for awhile. Of late his position there had been anything but a pleasant one. The silent, deadly feud between his two nephews troubled him not a little. If Kester would only have gone away, then, so far, all would have been well. But having pressed him so earnestly to

visit Park Newton, he could not, with any show of conscience, ask him to go till he was ready to do so of his own accord. Knowing what he knew, that Kester was all but proved to have been the murderer of Percy Osmond, he might well not care to live under the same roof with him, hiding his feelings under a mask, and, while pretending to know nothing, to be in reality cognisant of the whole dreadful story. Knowing what he knew, that Richard was none other than Lionel, and knowing the quest on which he was engaged, and that, sooner or later, the climax must come, he might well wish to be away from Park Newton when that most wretched day should dawn—a day which would prove the innocence of one nephew at the price of the other's guilt. Therefore did General St. George accept his old friend's invitation to stay with him for an indefinite length of time—till, in fact, Kester should have left Park Newton, or till the tangled knot of events should, in some other way, have unravelled itself.

When, at length, Lionel had decided that he would take the advice of his friends as to what his future course should be, he was obliged to await Tom Bristow's return before it was possible to do anything. Then, when Tom did get back home, the General had to be written to. When he understood what he was wanted for, he agreed to come on certain conditions. He was to come to Fern Cottage, spend one night there, and go back to his friend's house next day. No one, except those assembled at the cottage, was to know anything of his journey. Above all, it was to be kept a profound secret from Kester St. George.

Thus it fell out that on a certain April evening there were assembled, in the parlour of the cottage, Edith, Mrs. Garside, General St. George, Tom Bristow, and Lionel. It was a very serious occasion, and they all felt it to be such.

The General would sit close to Edith, whom he had not seen for a little while; and several times during the evening he took possession

of one of her hands, and patted it affectionately between his own withered palms.

"You are not looking quite so well, my dear, as when I saw you last," had been his first words after kissing her. Her cheeks were, indeed, just beginning to look in the slightest degree hollow and worn, nor did her eyes look quite so bright as of old. The wonder was, considering all that she had gone through during the last twelve months, that she looked as fair and fresh as she did. Of Mrs. Garside, whom we have not seen for some little time, it may be said that she looked plumper and more matronly than ever. But then nothing could have kept Mrs. Garside from looking plump and matronly. She was one of those people off whom the troubles and anxieties of life slip as easily as water slips off a duck's back. Although she had a copious supply of tears at command, nothing ever troubled her deeply or for long, simply because there was no depth to be troubled. She was always cheerful, because she was shallow; and she was always kindhearted so long as her

kindness of heart did not involve any self-sacrifice on her part. "What a very pleasant person Mrs. Garside is," was the general verdict of society. And so she was—very pleasant. If her father had been hanged on a Monday for sheepstealing, by Tuesday she would have been as pleasant and cheerful as ever.

But we must not be unjust to Mrs. Garside. She had one affection, and one only, her love for Edith. During all the days of Edith's tribulation, her aunt had never deserted her —had not even thought of deserting her; and now, for Edith's sake, she had buried herself alive in Fern Cottage, where her only excitement was a little mild shopping, now and then, in Duxley High Street, under the incognito of a thick veil, or a welcome visit once and again from Miss Culpepper. Under these depressing circumstances, it ought perhaps to be put down to the credit of Mrs. Garside, rather than to her discredit, that her cheerfulness was not one whit abated, and that her face was a picture of health and content.

"I think you know why I have asked you to meet me here to-night," began Lionel. "I want your advice: I want you to tell me what step I must take next. You know what the purpose of my life has been ever since the night I escaped from prison. You know how persistently I have pursued that purpose—that I have allowed nothing to deter me or turn me aside from it. The result is that there has grown under my hands a fatal array of evidence, all tending to implicate one man—all pointing with deadly accuracy to one person, and to one only, as the murderer of Percy Osmond. I have but to open my mouth, and the four walls of a prison would shut him round as fast as ever they shut round me; I have but to speak of half I know and that man would have to take his trial for Wilful Murder even as I took mine. But shall I do this thing? That is the question that I want you to help me to answer. So long as the chain of evidence remained incomplete, so long as certain links were wanting to it, I felt

that my task was unfinished. But at last I have all that I need. There is nothing more to search for. My task, so far, is at an end. Knowing, then, what I know, and with such proofs in my possession, am I to stop here? Am I to rest content with what I have done, and go no step farther? Or am I to go through with it to the bitter end? What that end would involve you know as well as I could tell you."

He ceased, and for a little while they all sat in silence. General St. George was the first to speak. "Lionel knows, and you all know, that from the very first he has had my heartfelt sympathy in this unhappy business. He has not had my sympathy only, he has had my help, although I have seen for a long time the point to which we were all tending, and the terrible consequences that must necessarily ensue. Me those consequences affect with peculiar force. One nephew can only be saved at the expense of the irretrievable ruin and disgrace of the other. It is not as though we had been searching in the

dark, and had there found the blood-stained hand of a stranger. The hand we have so grasped is that of one of our own kin—one of ourselves. And that makes the dreadful part of the affair. Still, I would not have you misunderstand me. I am as closely bound to Lionel—my sympathy and help are his as much to-day as ever they were, and should he choose to go through with this business in the same way as he would go through with it in the case of an utter stranger, I shall be the last man in the world to blame him. More: I will march with him side by side, whatever be the goal to which his steps may lead him. Such unparalleled wrongs as his demand unparalleled reparation. For all that, however, it is still a most serious question whether there is not a possibility of effecting some kind of a compromise: whether there is not somewhere a door of escape open by means of which we may avert a catastrophe almost too terrible even to bear thinking about."

"What is your opinion, Bristow?" said

Lionel, turning to Tom. "What say you, my friend of friends?"

"I have a certain diffidence in offering any opinion," said Tom, "simply on account of the relationship of the two persons chiefly involved. To tell the world all that you know, would, undoubtedly, bring about a family catastrophe of a most painful nature. It therefore seems to me that the members of that family, and they alone, should be empowered to offer an opinion on a question so delicate as the one now under consideration."

"Not so," said Lionel, emphatically. "No one could have a better right, or even so great a right, to offer an opinion as you. But for you, I should not have been here to-night to ask for that opinion."

"Nor I here but for you," interrupted Tom.

"I will put my question to you in a different form," said Lionel; "and so put to you, I shall expect you to answer it in your usual clear and straightforward way. Bristow, if you were circumstanced exactly as I am

now circumstanced, what would you do in my place?"

"I would go through with the task I had taken in hand, let the consequences be what they might," said Tom, without a moment's hesitation. "Nothing should hold me back. I would clear my own name and my own fame, and let punishment fall where punishment is due. You are still young, Dering, and a fair career and a happy future may still be yours if you like to claim them."

Tom's words were very emphatic, and for a little while no one spoke. "We have yet to hear what Edith has to say," said the General. "Her interests in the matter are second only to those of Lionel."

"Yes, it is my wife's turn to speak next," said Lionel.

"What my opinion is, you know well, dearest, and have known for a long time."

"My uncle and Bristow would like to hear it from your own lips."

"Uncle," began Edith, with a little blush,

"whatever Lionel may ultimately decide to do will doubtless be for the best. The last wish I have in the world is to lead him or guide him in any way in opposition to his own convictions. But I have thought this: that it would be very terrible indeed to have to take part in a second tragedy—a tragedy that, in some of its features, would be far more dreadful than that first one, which none of us can ever forget. No one can know better than I know how grievously my husband has been sinned against. But nothing can altogether undo the wrong that has been done. Would it make my husband a happy man if, instead of being the accused, he should become the accuser? Let us for a few moments try to imagine that this second tragedy has been worked out in all its frightful consequences. That my husband has told everything. That he who is guilty has been duly punished. That Lionel's fair fame has been re-established, and that he and I are living at Park Newton as if nothing had ever happened to disturb the commonplace tenor of our lives.

In such a case, would my husband be a happy man? No. I know him too well to believe it possible that he could ever be happy or contented. The image of that man—one of his own kith and kin, we must remember—would be for ever in his mind. He would be the prey of a remorse all the more bitter in that the world would hold him as without blame. But would he so hold himself? I think not—I am sure not. He would feel as if he had sought for and accepted the price of blood." Overcome by her emotion, she ceased.

"I think in a great measure as you think, my dear," said the General. "What course do you propose that your husband should adopt?"

"It is not for me to propose anything," answered Edith. "I can only suggest certain views of the question, and leave it for you and Lionel to adopt them or reject them, as may seem best to you."

"Holding the proofs of his innocence in his hands as he does," said the General, "is it

your wish that Lionel should sit down contented with what he has already achieved, and knowing that the real facts of his story are in the keeping of you and me, and two or three trusted friends, rest satisfied with that and ask for nothing more ?"

"No, I hardly go so far as that," said Edith, with a faint smile. "I think that the man who committed the crime should know that Lionel still lives, and that he holds in his hands the proof at once of his own innocence and of the other's guilt. Beyond that I say this: The world believes my husband to be dead: rather than re-open so terrible a wound, let the world continue so to believe. My husband and I can do without the world, as well as it can do without us. We have our mutual love, which nothing can deprive us of: against that the shafts of Fortune beat as vainly as hailstones against a castle wall. On this earth of ours are places sweet and fair without number. In one of them—not altogether dissevered from those ties of friendship which have already made our married

life so beautiful—my husband and I could build up a new home, with no sad memories of the past to cling around it; and when this haunting shadow that now broods over his life shall have been brushed away for ever, then I think—I know—I feel sure that I can make him happy!" Her voice, her eyes, her whole manner were imbued with a sweet fervour that it was impossible to resist.

Lionel crossed over and kissed her. "My darling!" he said. "But for your love and care I should long ago have been a madman."

"You, my dear, have put into words," said the General, "the very ideas that for a long time have been floating about, half formed, in my own mind. Lionel, what have you to say to your wife's suggestions?"

"Only this: that I have made up my mind to follow them. *He* shall know that I am alive, and that I hold the proofs of his guilt, ready to produce them at a moment's notice, should I ever be compelled to do so. Beyond that, I will leave him in

peace—to such peace as his own conscience will give him. The world believes Lionel Dering to be dead and buried. Dead and buried he shall still remain, and 'requiescat in pace' be written under his name."

The General got up with tears in his eyes and shook Lionel warmly by the hand. "Good boy! good boy! You will not go without your reward," was all that he could say.

"The eighth of May will soon be here," said Lionel—"the anniversary of poor Osmond's murder. On that day he shall be told. But I shall tell him in my own fashion. On that day, uncle, you must promise to give me your company; and you yours, Tom. After that I shall trouble you no more."

If Tom Bristow dissented from the conclusion thus come to, he said no word to that effect. There was one point, however, that struck his practical mind as having been altogether overlooked; and as soon as Edith and Mrs. Garside had left the room he did not fail to mention it.

"What about the income of eleven thousand a year?" he said. "You are surely not going to let the whole of that slip through your fingers?"

"Ah, by-the-by, that point never struck me," said the General. "No, it would be decidedly unjust both to yourself and your wife, Lionel, to give up the income as well as the position."

"Now you are importing a mercenary tone into the affair that is utterly distasteful to me. It looks as if I were being bribed to keep silence."

"That is sheer nonsense," said the General. "You have but to hold out your hand to take the whole."

Lionel said no more, but went and sat down dejectedly on the sofa.

"You and I must settle this matter between us," said the General to Tom. "It is most important. It shall be my place to see that whatever is agreed upon shall be duly carried out in the arrangement between the two men. I should think that if the income were divided

it would be about as fair a thing as could be done. What say you?"

"I agree with you entirely," said Tom. "The other one will have the name and position to keep up, and that can't be done for nothing."

"Then it shall be so settled."

"There is one other point that I think ought to be settled at the same time. Who is to have Park Newton after *his* death? Lionel may have children. *He* may marry and have children. But, in common justice, the estate ought to be secured on Dering's eldest child, whether the present possessor die with or without an heir."

"Certainly, certainly. Good gracious me! a most valuable suggestion. Strange, now, that it never struck me. Yes, yes: Lionel's eldest child must have the estate. I will see that there is no possible mistake on that score."

CHAPTER X.

HOW TOM WINS HIS WIFE.

AFTER Mrs. McDermott's departure from Pincote, life there slipped back into its old quiet groove—into its old dull groove which was growing duller day by day. The Squire had altogether ceased to see company: when any of his old friends called he was never at home to them; and on the score of ill health he declined every invitation that was sent to him. But it was not altogether on account of his health that these invitations were declined, because three or four times a week he would be seen somewhere about the country roads being driven out by Jane in the basket-carriage. There was another reason for this state of things—a

reason to which his friends and neighbours were not slow in giving a name. The Squire in his old age was becoming a miser: that is what the said friends and neighbours averred. But to dub him as a miser was altogether unjust: he was simply becoming penurious for his daughter's sake, as many other men are penurious for ends much more ignoble. He had, in fact, decided upon carrying out that modest scheme of domestic retrenchment of which mention has been made in a previous chapter, and the mode of living adopted by him now did undoubtedly, to many people, seem miserly in comparison with that lavish hospitality for which Pincote had heretofore been noted. The Squire knew that he could not go much into society without giving return invitations. Now the four or five state dinners which he had been in the habit of giving every year were very elaborate and expensive affairs, and he no longer felt himself justified in keeping them up. Instead of spending so many pounds per annum in entertaining a number of people for whom he cared little or nothing,

would it not be better to add the amount, trifling though it might seem, to that other trifling amount—only some few hundreds of pounds when all was told—which he had already managed to scrape together as a little nest-egg for Jane when he should be gone from her side for ever, and Pincote could no longer be her home? "If I had only died a year ago," he would sometimes say to himself, "then Jenny would have had a handsome fortune to call her own. Now she's next door to being a pauper."

Half his journeys into Duxley now-a-days were to the bank—not to Sugden's Bank, we may be sure, but to the Town and County—and he gloated over every five pounds added to the fund invested in his daughter's name as something more added to the nest-egg; and to be able to put away fifty pounds in a lump now afforded him far more genuine delight than the putting away of a thousand would have done six months previously.

There had been little or no conversation between Jane and her father respecting the

loss of her fortune since that memorable night when the Squire himself first heard the fatal tidings, and Jane was far more anxious than he was that the topic should never be broached between them again. She guessed in part what his object might be when he began to cut down the house expenses at Pincote—discharging some half dozen of his people; raising his farm rents where it was possible to do so; letting out the whole, instead of a portion only, of the park as pasturage for sheep; selling some of his horses, and the whole of his famous cellar of wines; besides arranging for part of the produce of his kitchen garden to be taken by a greengrocer at Duxley. She guessed, but that was all. Her father said nothing definite as to his reasons for so doing, and she made no inquiry. The sphere of his enjoyment had now become a very limited one. If it gave him pleasure —and she could not doubt that it did—to live penuriously so as to be enabled to put away a few extra pounds per annum, she would not mar the edge of that pleasure by

seeming even to notice what was going on, much less make any inquiry as to its meaning. The Squire, on his part, had many a good chuckle in the solitude of his own room. "After I'm gone, she'll know what it all means," he would say to himself. "She's puzzled now—they are all puzzled. They call me a miser, do they? Let 'em call me what they like. Another twenty put away to-day. That makes——" and out would come his pass-book and his spectacles.

The fact that the Squire no longer either received company or went into society compelled Jane, in a great measure, to follow his example. There were two or three houses to which, if she chose, she could still go without its being thought strange that there was no return invitation to Pincote; and there were two or three old school friends whom she could invite to a cup of tea in her own little room without their feeling offended that they were not asked to stay to dinner. But of society, in the general sense of the term, Jane now saw little or nothing. To her this was

no source of regret. Just now she was far too deeply in love to care very much for company of any kind.

Happy was it for Jane that the only exception to her father's no-society rule was in favour of the man she loved. The Squire had by no means forgotten Mrs. McDermott's warning words, nor Tom's frank confession of his love for Jane; and it had certainly been no part of his intention to encourage Tom's visits to Pincote after the widow's abrupt departure. In honour of that departure, there had been, next day, a little dinner of state, at which Mr. Culpepper had made his appearance in a dress coat and white cravat, at which there had been French side dishes, and at which the Squire had drunk Tom's health in a bumper of the very best port which his cellar contained. But when they parted that night, when the Squire, having hobbled to the front door, shook hands with Tom, and bade him good-night, it was with a sort of half intimation that some considerable time would probably elapse before they should

have the pleasure of seeing him at Pincote again. In the first flush of his delight at having got rid of his sister, the Squire thought that he could be content and happy at home of an evening with no company save that of Jane, even as he had been content and happy long before he had known Tom Bristow. But in so thinking he had overlooked one very important point. The Titus Culpepper of six months ago had been a prosperous, well-to-do gentleman, satisfied with himself and all the world, in tolerable health, and excited by the prospect of making a magnificent fortune without trouble or anxiety. The Titus Culpepper of to-day was a broken-down gambler—a gambler who had madly speculated with his daughter's fortune, and had lost it. Broken-down, too, was he in health, in spirits, and in temper; and, worst sign of all, a man who no longer found any pleasure in the company of his own thoughts, and who began to dislike to sit alone even for half an hour at a time. Of this change in himself the Squire knew and suspected no-

thing: how few of us do know of such changes! Other people may change—nay, do we not see them changing daily around us, and smile good-naturedly as we note how querulous and hard to please poor Jones has become of late? But that we—we—should so change, becoming a burden to ourselves and a trial to those around us, with our queer, cross-grained ways, our peevish, variable tempers, and our general belief that the sun shines less brightly, and that the world is less beautiful than it was a little while ago—that is altogether impossible. The change is always in others, never in our immaculate selves.

The Squire was a man who, all his life, had preferred men's company to that of the opposite sex. His tastes were not at all æsthetic. He liked to talk about cattle, and crops, and the state of the markets; to talk a little about imperial politics—chiefly confined to blackguarding "the other side of the House"—and a great deal about local politics. He had been in the habit of talking by the hour

together about paving, and lighting, and sewage, and the state of the highways: all useful matters without a doubt, but hardly topics calculated to interest a lady. Though he liked to have Jane play to him now and then—but never for more than ten minutes at any one time—he always designated it as "tinkling;" and as often as not, when he asked her to sing, he would say, "Now, Jenny, lass, give us a squall." But for all this, in former times Jane and he had got on very well together on the occasions when they had been without company at Pincote. He was moving about a good deal in the world at that time, mixing with various people, talking to and being talked to by different friends and acquaintances, and was at no loss for subjects to talk about, even though those subjects might not be particularly interesting to his daughter. But Jane made a capital listener, and could always give him a good commonplace answer, and that was all he craved—that and three-fourths of the talk to himself.

Of late, however, as we have already seen, the Squire had all but given up going into society, by which means he at once dried up the source from which he had been in the habit of obtaining his conversational ideas. When he came to dine alone with Jane he found himself with nothing to talk about. Under such circumstances there was nothing left for him but grumbling. But even grumbling becomes tiresome after a time, especially when the person to whom such complainings are addressed never takes the trouble to contradict you, and is incapable of being grumbled at herself.

It was after one of these tedious evenings that the Squire said to Jane, "We may as well have Bristow up to-morrow, I think. I want to see him about one or two things, and he may as well stop for dinner. So you had better drop him a line."

The Squire had nothing of any importance to see Tom about, but he was too stubborn to own, even to himself, that it was the young man's lively company that he was secretly

longing for. The weather next morning happened to be very bad, and Jane smiled demurely to herself as she noted how anxious her father was lest the rain should keep Tom from coming. Jane knew that neither rain nor anything else would keep him away. "Papa is almost as anxious to see him as I am," she said to herself. "He thought that he could live without him: he now begins to find out his mistake."

Sure enough, Tom did not fail to be there. The Squire gave him a hearty greeting, and took him into the study before he had an opportunity of seeing Jane. "I've heard nothing more from those railway people about the Croft," he said. "Penfold was here yesterday and wanted to know whether he was to go on with the villas—all the foundations are now in, you know. I hardly knew what instructions to give him."

"If you were to ask me, sir," said Tom, "I should certainly say, let him begin to run up the carcases as quickly as possible. I happen to know that the company must have

the Croft—that they cannot possibly do without it. They are only hanging fire awhile, hoping to get you to go to them and make them an offer, instead of their being compelled to come to you; which, in a transaction of this nature, makes all the difference."

"I don't think you are far wrong in your views," said Mr. Culpepper. "I'll turn over in my mind what you've said." Which meant that the Squire would certainly adopt Tom's advice.

"No love-making, you know, Bristow," whispered the old man, with a dig in the ribs, as they entered the dining-room.

"You may trust me, sir," said Tom.

"I'm not so sure on that score. We are none of us saints when a pretty girl is in question."

Tom did not fail to keep the Squire alive during dinner. To the old man his fund of news seemed inexhaustible. In reality, his resources in that line were never put to the test. Three or four skilfully introduced topics sufficed. The Squire's own long-

winded remarks, unknown to himself, filled up three-fourths of the time. Then Tom made a splendid listener. His attention never flagged. He was always ready with his "I quite agree with you, sir;" or his "Just so, sir;" or his "Those are my sentiments exactly, sir." To be able to talk for half an hour at a time to an appreciative listener on some topic that interested him strongly was a treat that the Squire thoroughly enjoyed.

After the cloth was drawn he decided that instead of remaining by himself for half an hour, he would go with the young people to the drawing-room. He could have his snooze just as well there as in the dining-room, and he flattered himself that his presence, even though he might be asleep, would be a sufficient safeguard against any of that illicit love-making respecting which Bristow had been duly cautioned.

As a still further precaution, he nudged Tom again, as they went into the drawing-room, and whispered, "None of your tom-

foolery, remember." Five minutes later he was fast asleep.

They could not play, or sing, or talk much, while the Squire slept, so they fell back upon chess. "There's to be no love-making, you know, Jenny," whispered Tom, across the table, with a twinkle in his eye.

"None, whatever," whispered Jane back, with a little shake of the head, and a demure smile.

A mutual understanding having thus been come to, there was no need for any further conversation, except about the incidents of the game, which, truth to tell, was very badly played on both sides. In place of studying the board, as a chess-player ought to do, Jane found her eyes, quite unconsciously to herself, studying the face of her opponent, while Tom's hand, wanderiug purposelessly about the board, frequently found itself taking hold of Jane's hand instead of a knight or a pawn; so that when at last the game did contrive to work itself out to an ineffective conclusion, they could hardly have said with certainty which

one of them had checkmated the other. The Squire woke up, smiling and well-pleased. He had not heard them talking to each other, and there could be no harm in their playing a simple game of chess. If he were content, they had no reason to be otherwise.

After this the Squire would insist on having Tom up at Pincote, as often as the latter could possibly contrive to be there. In spite of himself the old man's heart warmed imperceptibly towards him, and when it so happened that business took Tom away from home for two or three days, then the Squire grew so fretful and peevish that all Jane's tact and good temper were needed to make life at all endurable. She tried her best to persuade him to invite some of his old friends to come and see him, or go himself and call upon some of them, but in vain. Bristow he wanted, and no one but Bristow would he have. He looked upon himself as a ruined man, as a man whom it behoved to economize in every possible way. To keep company costs money : Tom Bristow was a sensible fellow, with whom it was not

necessary to stand on ceremony, or be at any extra expense—a man who was content with a chop and a rice pudding, and a glass of St. Julien. "He doesn't come here for what he gets to eat and drink. I like his society, and he likes mine. He finds that he can learn a good many things from me, and he's not above learning."

All this time the works at Knockley Holt were being pushed busily forward, much to the bewilderment and aggravation of the good people of Duxley. They were aggravated, and they considered they had a right to be aggravated, because they could not understand, and had not been told, what it was that was intended to be done there. In a small town like Duxley, no inhabitant has a right to put before his fellow-citizens a problem which they find incapable of solution, and then when asked to solve it for them decline to do so. Such conduct merits the severest social reprehension.

Surely next to the madness of building a row of villas on Prior's Croft, was the puzzling

folly of digging a hole in Knockley Holt. After much discussion pro and con, amongst the townspeople—chiefly over sundry glasses of whiskey toddy, in sundry bar parlours, after business hours—it seemed to be settled that Culpepper's Hole, as some wag had christened it, could be intended for nothing else than an artesian well—though what was the exact nature of an artesian well it would have puzzled some of the Duxley wiseacres to tell, and why water should be bored for there, and to what uses it could be put when so obtained, they would have been still more at a loss to say. The Squire could not drive into Duxley without being tackled by one or another of his friends as to what he was about at Knockley Holt. But the old man would only wink and shake his head, and try to look wise, and say, "It doesn't do to blab everything nowadays, but between you and me and the post—this is in confidence, mind—I'm digging a tunnel to the Antipodes." Then he would chuckle and give the reins a shake, and Diamond

would trot off with him, leaving his questioner angry or amused, as the case might be.

It was not known to any one in Duxley, except the Squire's lawyer, that Knockley Holt was now the property of Tom Bristow. That the works there were under Tom's direction was a well-known fact, but he was merely looked upon as Mr. Culpepper's foreman in the matter. "Gets a couple of hundred or so a year for looking after the Squire's affairs," one wiseacre would remark to another. "If not, how does he live? Seems to have nothing to do when he's not at Pincote. A poor way of getting a living. Serve him right: he should have stopped with old Hoskyns when he had the chance, and not have thought he was going to set the Thames on fire with his six thousand pounds."

No one could be possessed by a more burning desire than the Squire himself to know the meaning of the works at Knockley Holt, but having asked once and asked in vain, his pride would not allow him to make any further direct

inquiry. Not a day passed on which he saw Tom, that he did not try, by one or two vague hints, to lead up to the subject, but when Tom turned the talk into another channel, then the old man would see that the time for him to be enlightened had not yet come.

But it did come at last, and after what was, in reality, no very long waiting. On a certain afternoon—to be precise in our dates, it was the fifth of May—Tom walked over to Pincote, in search of the Squire. He found him in his study, wearying his brain over a column of figures, which would persist in coming to a different total every time it was added up. The first thing Tom did was to take the column of figures and bring it to a correct total. This done, his next act was to produce something from his pocket that was carefully wrapped up in a piece of brown paper. He pushed the parcel across the table to the Squire. "Will you oblige me, sir," he said, "by opening that paper, and giving me your opinion as to the contents?"

"Why, bless my heart, this is neither more

nor less than a lump of coal!" said the Squire, when he had opened the paper.

"Exactly so, sir. As you say, this is neither more nor less than a lump of coal. But where do you think it came from?"

"There you puzzle me. Though I don't know that it can matter much to me where it came from."

"But it matters very much to you, sir. This lump of coal came from Knockley Holt."

The Squire was rather dull of comprehension. "Well, what is there so wonderful about that?" he said. "I dare say it was stolen by some of those confounded gipsies, and left there when they moved."

"What I mean is this, sir," answered Tom, with just a shade of impatience in his tone. "This piece of coal is but a specimen of a splendid seam which has been struck by my men at the bottom of the shaft at Knockley Holt."

The Squire stared at him, and gave a long, low whistle. "Do you mean to say that you

have found a bed of coal at the bottom of the hole you have been digging at Knockley Holt ?"

"That is precisely what I have found, sir, and it is precisely what I have been trying to find from the first."

"I see it all now!" said the Squire. "What a lucky young scamp you are! But what on earth put it into your head to go looking for coal at Knockley Holt ?"

"I had a friend of mine, who is a very clever mining engineer, staying with me for a little while some time ago. But my friend is not only an engineer—he is a practical geologist as well. When out for a constitutional one day, we found ourselves at Knockley Holt. My friend was struck with its appearance—so different from that of the country around. 'Unless I am much mistaken, there is coal under here,' he said, 'and at no great distance from the surface either. The owner ought to think himself a lucky man—that is, if he knows the value of it.' Well, sir, not content with what my friend said, I paid

a heavy fee and had one of the most eminent geologists of the day down from London to examine and report upon it. His report coincided exactly with my friend's opinion. You know the rest, sir. I came to you with a view of getting a lease of the ground, and found you desirous of selling it. I was only too glad to have the chance of buying it. I set a lot of men and a steam engine to work without a day's delay, and that lump of coal, sir, is the happy result."

The Squire rubbed his spectacles for a moment or two without speaking. "Bristow, that's an old head of yours on those young shoulders," he said at last. "With all my heart I congratulate you on your good fortune. I know no man who deserves it more than you do. Yes, Bristow, I congratulate you, though I can't help saying that I wish that I had had a friend to have told me what was told you before I let you have the ground. For want of such a friend I have lost a fortune."

"That is just what I have come to see you about, sir," said Tom, as he rose and pushed

back his chair. The Squire looked up at him in surprise. "Although I bought Knockley Holt from you as a speculation, I had a pretty good idea when I bought it as to what I should find below the surface. If I had not found what I expected, my bargain would have been a dear one; but having found what I expected, it is just the opposite. In fact, sir, you have lost a fortune, and I have found one."

"I know it—I know it," groaned the Squire. "But you needn't twit me with it."

"So far the speculation was a perfectly legitimate one, as speculations go now-a-days. But that is not the sort of thing I wish to exist between you and me. You have been very kind to me in many ways, and I have much to thank you for. I could not bear to treat you in this matter as I should treat a stranger. I could not bear to think that I was making a fortune out of a piece of ground that but a few short weeks ago was your property. The money so made would seem to me to bring a curse with it, rather than a

blessing. I should feel as if nothing would ever prosper with me afterwards. Sir, I will not have this coal mine. There are plenty of other channels open to me for making money. Here are the title deeds of the property. I give them back to you. You shall repay me the twelve hundred pounds purchase-money, and reimburse me for the expenses I have been put to in sinking the shaft. But as for the pit itself, I will have nothing to do with it."

Tom had produced the title deeds from his pocket and had laid them on the table while speaking. He now pushed them across to the Squire. Then he took the deed of sale tore it across, and threw the fragments into the grate.

It is doubtful whether Titus Culpepper had ever been more astonished in the whole course of his life than he was at the present moment. For a little while he seemed utterly at a loss for words, but when he did speak, his words were not lacking in force.

"Bristow, you are a confounded fool!" he said with emphasis.

"I have been told that many times before."

"You are a confounded fool—but you are a gentleman."

Tom merely bowed.

"You propose to give me back the title deeds of Knockley Holt, after having found what may literally be termed a gold mine there—eh?"

"I don't propose to do it, sir. I have done it already. There are the title deeds," pointing to the table. "There is the deed of sale," pointing to the fire-grate.

"And do you think, sir," said the Squire, with dignity, "that Titus Culpepper is the man to accept such a romantic piece of generosity from one who is little more than a boy! Not so.—It would be impossible for me to forgive myself, were I to do anything of the kind. The property is fairly and legally yours, and yours it must remain."

"It shall not, sir! By heaven! I will not have it. There are the title deeds. Do with them as you will." He buttoned his coat,

and took up his hat, and turned to leave the room.

"Stop, Bristow, stop!" said the Squire, as he rose from his chair. Tom halted with the handle of the door in his hand, but he did not go back to the table.

Mr. Culpepper walked to the window and stood there looking out for full three minutes without uttering a word. Then he turned and beckoned Tom to go to him.

"Bristow," he said, laying his hand affectionately on Tom's shoulder, "as I said before, you are a gentleman—a gentleman in mind and feeling. More than that a man cannot be, whether his family be old or new. You propose to do a certain thing which I can only accede to on one condition."

"Name it, sir," said Tom briefly.

"I cannot take Knockley Holt from you without giving you something like an equivalent in return. Now, I only possess one thing that you would care to receive at my hands—and that is the most precious thing I have on earth. Exchange is no robbery. I will agree

to take back Knockley Holt from you, if you will take in exchange for it—my daughter Jane."

"Oh! Mr. Culpepper."

"That you love her, I know already, and I dare say the sly hussy is equally as fond of you. If such be the case, take her. I know no man who so thoroughly deserves her, or who has so much right to her as you have."

CHAPTER XI.

THE EIGHTH OF MAY.

THE eighth of May had come round at last.

Of all days in the year this was the one that Kester St. George intended least to spend at Park Newton, but, as circumstances fell out, he could not well avoid doing so.

After the death and burial of Mother Mim —the expenses of the last-named ceremony being defrayed out of Kester's pocket—it had been his intention to leave Park Newton at once and for ever. But it so fell out that in the document purloined by him from the pocket of Skeggs when that individual lay dead on the moor, there was given the

name of a certain person, still living, who could depose, of his own personal knowledge, to the truth of the facts as put down in the dying woman's confession. This person was the only witness to the facts there stated who was now alive. The name of the man in question was William Bendall, and the point that Kester had now to clear up was: Who was this William Bendall, and where was he to be found? There was no address given in the Confession, nor any hint as to the man's whereabouts; but Skeggs had doubtless known where he was to be found, and had, in fact, told Kester that he could put his hand on the man at a day's notice.

With such a sword as this hanging over his head, Kester felt that it was impossible for him to leave Park Newton. When the man should learn that Mother Mim was dead, which he probably would do in the course of a few days, and when the restraining power which had doubtless kept him silent should be removed for ever, what was to prevent him from telling all that he knew, or, at least,

from giving such broad hints as to the information in his possession as might lead to inquiry—to many inquiries, perchance: to far more than Kester would care to encounter—unless he should ever be so unfortunate as to be driven to bay?

But, as yet, he was not driven to bay, nor anything like it. It behoved him, therefore, or so it seemed to him, to make certain cautious inquiries as to the whereabouts of Mr. William Bendall, with the view of ascertaining what kind of a man he was, or whether there was any danger to be apprehended from him. And if so, how could the danger best be met?

It was quite evident that it would be unadvisable for Kester to leave Park Newton while these inquiries were afoot. He might be wanted at any hour should Mr. Bendall, when found, prove intractable; so he stayed on at the old place, very much against his will in other respects. But, to a certain extent, his patience had already been rewarded. Mr. Bendall's address had been discovered,

and Mr. Bendall himself had been found to be first cousin to Mother Mim, and a railway ganger by profession. But just at this time he was away from home—his home being at Swarkstone, a great centre of railway industry, about twenty miles from Duxley—he having been sent out to Russia in charge of a cargo of railway plant. He was now expected back in the course of a few days, and Kester determined not to leave the neighbourhood till he had found out for himself what manner of man he was.

We may here finally dispose of Skeggs. His body was not found till two days after Kester's visit to it. There, too, was found his broken leg, so that the nature of the accident he had met with was clearly seen, and it was at once understood how he had come by his death. No one except the girl Nell had seen Kester St. George in his company, so, as it fell out, that gentleman's name was never even whispered in connexion with the affair.

The future of Nell had been a point that Mr. St. George had anxiously discussed in his

own mind, after Mother Mim's death. What to do with such a strange girl he knew not, nor how best to secure her silence. Did she really know anything, as she asserted that she did, or did she not? If anything, how much did she know, and to what use did she intend to put her knowledge? Kester had no opportunity of talking to her in private before the funeral, so he made an appointment with her for the morning following that event. She was to meet him at a certain milestone on the Duxley Road at eleven o'clock. Kester was there to the minute. But Miss Nell was not there, nor did she come at all. Kester went back home in a fume, and after luncheon he rode over to Mother Mim's cottage without once slackening rein. There he found the old woman who had been looking after matters previously to the funeral. From her he ascertained that Nell had disappeared about two hours after her return from seeing the last of her grandmother, taking with her her new black frock and a few other things tied up in a bundle, and had given no hint as to

where she was going, or whether it was her intention ever to come back.

The girl's disappearance had been a source of considerable disquietude to Kester for several days, but as time passed on without bringing any sign of her, or any information as to where she was, his uneasiness gradually wore itself away, till he came at last to persuade himself that from that quarter at least there was no possible danger to be apprehended.

But had it not been for another and a much more potent reason, Kester St. George would certainly not have spent the eighth of May at Park Newton, not even though he could not have left it till the seventh, and had been compelled to come back to it on the ninth. He would have gone somewhere—anywhere—if only for a dozen hours—if only from sunset till sunrise, had it in anyway been possible for him to do so. But it so happened that it was not possible for him to do so. On the fifth he received a letter from his uncle, which astonished him very much. General St.

George was still staying at Salisbury with his sick friend, Major Beauchamp. He wrote as under:

"All being well, I shall be back at Park Newton on the eighth instant, but for a few hours only. I don't know whether your cousin Richard has told you that he is tired of England, and has decided upon going out to New Zealand, and that he has persuaded me to go with him."

"The old fool! To think of going to New Zealand at his time of life!" muttered Kester. "Of course, it's Master Richard's dodge to take him with him, so as to make sure of his money when he dies. Well, if I can only get rid of the young one, the old one may go with him, and welcome." Then he went on with his uncle's letter.

"I shall reach Park Newton on the eighth, about four P.M., when I hope to spend the evening with you. It will be my last evening

at the old place, and there are several things I wish to talk to you about. We—that is, Richard and I, leave by the eight o'clock train next morning direct for Gravesend, where the ship will be waiting for us. By this day next week, I shall have bidden a final farewell to dear Old England."

"So deucedly sudden. I hardly know what to make of it," said Kester, as he folded up the letter. "I would give much if it was any other day than the eighth. I never thought to spend that day here. But there's no help for it. Well, it will be better to spend it in company than to spend it here alone. Nothing could have persuaded me to do that."

"Yes, if the old boy goes to the other side of the world, there's no chance of any of his money coming to me," he said to himself later on. "That scowling cousin of mine will come in for the lot. Poor devil! I don't suppose he's got enough of his own to pay his passage out. I wouldn't mind giving a thousand pounds myself to be rid of him for ever."

The eighth dawned at last, cold and dull as English May days so often are. Breakfast was hardly over before Kester ordered his horse, and away he started without telling any one where he was going. He was out all day, and did not get back till five o'clock, an hour after the arrival of his uncle, with whom had come Mr. Perrins, the family lawyer. Him Kester knew of old, but had not seen for a long time. He was rather surprised to see him, but it struck Kester that his uncle had probably some private arrangements to make before leaving England, in which the aid of Mr. Perrins might be required.

"This is very sudden, uncle, about your leaving England," said Kester.

"Yes, it is very sudden," replied the General. "It is not more than three weeks since Dick told me that he intended to go out. The reasons he gave me for coming to that conclusion were such that I could not blame him. I have no son of my own, and, somehow, since poor Lionel left us, I seem to cling to that boy; and so it fell out, that I

presently made up my mind to go with him. I cannot bear the idea of living alone. I have only you and him—and you, Kester, are too much of a Bohemian, too much a citizen of the world—a wandering Arab who strikes his tent a dozen times a year—for me ever to think of staying with you. Dick is far more of an old fogey than you are, and he and I—I don't doubt—will get on very well together."

"All the same, uncle, I shall be deucedly sorry to lose you."

Kester was destined to be still more surprised when he came down to dinner, for there he found Mr. Hoskyns and the Reverend Mr. Wharton, the octogenarian Vicar of Duxley. Mr. Hoskyns he had seen incidentally during the course of the trial, but not since. The vicar he had known from boyhood.

It was by Lionel's express desire that the two lawyers and the vicar had been invited to-day to Park Newton. What he was going to tell Kester to-night should be told to them also. They were all, in a certain sense, friends of the family; they were all men of honour;

with them his secret would be safe. In simple justice to himself, he felt that it was not enough that his uncle and Bristow should be the sole depositories of that secret. There ought to be at least two or three family friends to whose custody it might be implicitly trusted, and whose good wishes and friendship would be sweet to him even in exile.

None of the three gentlemen had any suspicion as to the one particular reason why they had been invited to Park Newton: not one of them had any suspicion that Richard Dering was none other than the Lionel whom they all so sincerely mourned. They had simply been invited to a little dinner party given by General St. George on the eve of his departure from England for ever.

The last to arrive at Park Newton—and he did not arrive till two minutes before dinner was served—was Mr. Tom Bristow. He had driven Miss Culpepper from Pincote to Fern Cottage, and had stayed talking with Edith till the last minute.

Tom was an entire stranger to Kester St.

George. The General introduced them to each other. Tom had seen Kester several times, knowing well who he was, but the latter had no recollection of having ever seen Tom.

Neither the General, nor Tom, nor even Edith herself, had any idea as to the particular mode which Lionel would adopt for telling his cousin that which he had made up his mind to tell him. On that point he had kept his own counsel, having spoken no word to any one. It was a subject on which even his wife felt that she could not question him. During the past week he had been even more silent and distrait than usual. His thoughts were evidently occupied with one subject, to the exclusion of all others. He seemed hardly to notice, or be aware of, what was going on around him. For Edith the time was a very anxious one. All the preparations for the approaching voyage devolved upon her: that she did not mind in the least; what she prayed and longed for was that the fatal eighth might come and go in peace: might come and go without any encounter between

her husband and his cousin. Lionel and Tom were to ride across from Park Newton to Fern Cottage at the close of the evening—Tom, in order that he might escort Jane back to Pincote: Lionel, because he should then have bidden the old house a last farewell, because he should then have done with the past for ever, and because he should then be ready to start with his wife for their new home on the other side of the world.

"And will nothing that any of us can say or do, persuade you to reconsider your determination?" said Jane to Edith, as they sat, hand in hand, after Tom had gone forward to Park Newton. Mrs. Garside had gone into Duxley to make some final purchases, and they had the little parlour all to themselves.

"I'm afraid not," answered Edith with a melancholy smile.

"It seems so hard to lose you, just when everything is made straight and clear—just as your husband is able to prove his innocence to the world! Yes, and were I in his place I would prove it. I would cry it aloud on

the housetops, and let that other one pay the penalty which he deserves to pay. I would never banish myself from my native country for his sake; he is not worthy of such a sacrifice."

"You must not talk like that," said Edith, with a little extra squeeze of Jane's hand; "but it is easy to see who has been inoculating you with his wild doctrines."

"They are my own original sentiments, and not second-hand ones," said Jane emphatically. "There's nothing wild about them; they are plain common sense."

"There could be no happiness for either Lionel or me were we to follow the course suggested by you. Depend upon it, Jane, that what we are about to do is best for all concerned."

"I will never believe that it is good for me to lose my friends in this way. Do you know, I feel almost tempted to go with you."

"I wish, with all my heart, that you were going with us; but I'm afraid Mr. Culpepper is too deeply rooted in English soil to bear transplanting to a foreign clime."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Jane, with a little sigh. "Only I should so like to travel: I should so like a six months' voyage to somewhere."

"The voyage is just what I dread, only it would not do to tell Lionel so."

"You might have fixed on some place a little nearer than New Zealand, some place within four or five days' journey, where one could run over for a little holiday now and then and see you. It is very ridiculous of you to go so far away."

"When you say that, dear, you forget certain peculiarities of the case. If Lionel were to settle down at any place where there would be the least possibility of his being recognized, it would necessitate a perpetual disguise. This, in a little while, would become intolerable. He must go to a place where there will be no need for him to stain his face, or dye his hair, and where he can go about freely, and without fear of detection."

"I can quite understand what an immense relief it must be to you to get away from this

neighbourhood, with all its painful associations—to hide yourself in some remote valley where no shadow of the past can darken your door; but it seems to me that you need not go quite so far away in order to do that."

"It will be all for the best, dear, depend upon it."

"No; I cannot see it. If you had only gone to America, now! No one would recognize Mr. Dering there, and it would not be too far away for me to pay you a visit once every now and again. In fact, I should make it a condition of marrying Tom, that he gave me a promise to that effect. But, New Zealand!"

As the evening wore itself on, so did Edith's uneasiness increase, but she did her best to hide it from Jane and Mrs. Garside. Lionel had told her that she must not expect him much before midnight, and up to the time of the clock striking eleven she contrived to take her share in the conversation with tolerable composure, but after that time she was unable to altogether control herself. What terrible scenes might not even then be

enacting at Park Newton! To what danger might not her husband be exposed, while, only a mile away, they three were idly chatting about twenty indifferent topics! How intolerable it was to be a woman, to be condemned to inaction, to have no share in the dangers of those one loved, to be able to do nothing but wait—wait—wait! If she went to the window once, she went twenty times, to listen for the sound of coming hoofs. The roads were hard and dry, and it would be possible to hear the horsemen while they were still some distance away. To and fro she paced the little room like an imprisoned leopardess. White-faced, eager-eyed, her long slender fingers clasping and unclasping themselves unceasingly, she looked like some priestess of old, who sees in her mind's eye a vision of doom—a vision of things to come, pregnant with woe unutterable. The two women watched her in silence: hermood infected them: it could not be otherwise; but there was nothing for them to do; they could only wait and listen.

"I can bear this no longer," said Edith, at last; "the room suffocates me. I must get out into the fresh air. I must go and meet Lionel." She snatched up a shawl of Mrs. Garside's, that lay on the sofa, and flung it over her head and shoulders.

"Let me go with you," cried Jane, "I am almost as anxious as you are."

"Hush! hush!" cried Edith, suddenly, "I hear them coming!"

Hardly breathing, they all listened.

"I can hear nothing but the low moaning of the wind," cried Mrs. Garside, after a few moments.

"Nor I," said Jane.

"I tell you they are coming," said Edith. "There are two of them. Listen! Surely you can hear them now!" She flung open the window as she spoke; then could be plainly heard the sound of hoofs on the hard high-road. A minute or two later the horsemen drew rein at the cottage door. Martha Vince, candle in hand, lighted them up the

stairs, at the top of which the ladies stood waiting to receive them.

Very stern and very pale looked the face of Lionel Dering as, followed by Tom Bristow, he walked slowly upstairs as a man in a dream. He was no longer disguised: face, hands, and hair were their natural colour. To see him thus sent a thrill to every heart there. To each, and all of them, he seemed like a man newly risen from the grave.

Hardly had he reached the top of the stairs before Edith's white arms were round his neck.

"My darling! what is it?" she said. "What dreadful thing has happened?" He stooped his head still lower, and whispered something in her ear. She stared up into his face for a moment, then his arms tightened suddenly round her, and they all saw that she had fainted.

At Park Newton the evening wore itself slowly and gloomily away. Tom and Mr. Hoskyns, assisted occasionally by Mr. Perrins

and the vicar, did their best to keep the conversation from flagging, but at times with only indifferent success. None of them could forget what day it was—could forget what took place that night twelve months ago, only a few yards from where they were sitting; and so remembering, who could wonder that the dinner seemed tasteless and the wines without flavour, that the lights seemed to burn low, and that to the imagination of more than one there a shrouded figure was with them in the room, invisible to mortal eyes, but none the less surely there, drinking when they drank, pledging a health when they pledged one, and knowing well all the time which one of the company would be the first to join it in that Land of Shadows to which it now belonged.

Kester was altogether gloomy and preoccupied, and Lionel hardly spoke at all except when spoken to. General St. George was obliged to keep up some show of conversation out of compliment to his guests; but no one but himself knew how irksome it

was to do so. What did Lionel intend to do? Would there be a scene—a fracas—between the two cousins? What would be the end of the wretched business? How fervently he wished that the morrow was safely come, that he had seen that unhappy man's face for the last time, and that he, and Lionel, and Edith were fairly started on their long journey to the other side of the world!

The vicar and the two men of law had naturally expected that the party would break up by ten o'clock at the latest. Not that it mattered greatly to either Perrins or Hoskyns, who were to stay at Park Newton all night. But the vicar was an old man, and anxious to get home in decent time, so that when he began to fidget and look at his watch, Lionel, who was only waiting for him to make a move, knew that it would be impossible to detain him much longer.

"I must really ask you to excuse me, General," said the old man at last. "But I see that it is past ten o'clock, and quite time

for gay young sparks like me to be thinking of their night-caps."

"I hope you are not particular to a few minutes, vicar," said Lionel. "I have ordered coffee to be served in my room, and, with my uncle's permission, we will all adjourn there."

"You must not keep me long," said the vicar.

"I will not," said Lionel. "But I know that you like to finish up your evening with a little café noir; and I have, besides, a picture which I want to show you, and which I think will interest you very much—a picture which I want to show not only to you, Dr. Wharton, but to all the other gentlemen who are here to-night."

They all rose and made a move towards the door.

"As I don't care for café noir, and don't understand pictures, you will perhaps excuse me," said Kester, ignoring Lionel, and addressing himself to his uncle.

"You had better go with us," said Lionel,

turning to his cousin. "You are surely not going to be the first to break up the party."

"I don't want to break up the party. I will wait here till you come back," answered Kester, doggedly.

"You had better go with us," said Lionel, meaningly, but speaking so that the others could not hear him.

"Pray who made you dictator here?" said Kester haughtily. "I don't choose to go with you. That is enough."

"You had better go with us," said Lionel for the third time. "If you still decline, I can only assume that you are afraid to go."

"Afraid!" sneered Kester. "Of whom and what should I be afraid?"

"That is best known to yourself."

"Anyhow, I'm neither afraid of you nor of anything that you can do."

"If you decline going to my rooms, I can only conclude that you are kept away by some abject fear."

"Lead on.—I'll follow.—But mark my

words, you and I will have this little matter out in the morning—alone."

"Willingly."

The rooms occupied by Lionel were in the opposite wing of the house to those occupied by Kester. They were, in fact, in the same wing as, and no great distance from, the room where Percy Osmond had been murdered: a good and sufficient reason why Kester should get as far away as possible.

Lionel's sitting-room was a good-sized apartment, but it was divided into two by large folding doors, now closed. A moderator lamp stood on the table, together with coffee, cognac, and cigars.

"Gentlemen, I must ask you to excuse me for a few minutes," said Lionel. "My picture requires a little preparation before I can show it to you." So speaking he left the room. There was no servant. Each of the gentlemen, Kester excepted, helped himself to a cup of coffee.

Kester seated himself apart on a chair near the door. His eyes were bent on the floor.

He played absently with his watch-guard. Just now, as he was coming slowly upstairs, a shadowy hand had been laid on his shoulder, a ghostly voice had whispered in his ear. It was only that one little word that he had heard whispered oft-times before. "*Come!*" was all the voice said, but it was followed, this time, by a little malicious laugh, such as Kester had never heard before. Round his heart there was a cold, numb feeling, that was altogether strange to him; a dull singing in his ears like the faint echo of a tide beating on some far-away shore. No one spoke to him. No one seemed to know that he was there. He felt at that moment, with an unspeakable bitterness, how utterly alone he was in the world. There was no human being anywhere who, if he were to die that moment, would really regret him—not one single creature who would drop a solitary tear over his grave.—But such thoughts were miserable; they must be driven away somehow. He rose and went to the table, poured himself out half a tumbler of brandy, and drank it off

without water. "It puts fresh life into me as it goes down," he muttered to himself.

He was in the act of replacing the glass on the table when a sudden noise caused all eyes to turn in one direction. The folding doors were being unbolted from the inner side. Then they were opened till they stood about half a yard apart, but as yet all within was in darkness. Then from out this darkness issued the voice of Lionel—or, as most there took it to be, the voice of Richard—but Lionel himself was unseen.

"Gentlemen," said the voice, "you all know what day this is. It is the eighth of May. Twelve months ago to-night Percy Osmond was murdered. About that crime I have often thought and often dreamed. I dreamed about it only a little while ago, and in my dream I seemed to see how the murder really was done. What I then saw in my sleep, I have painted. What I have painted I am now going to show to you."

The folding doors were closed for a minute, and then flung wide open. The farther room

was now a blaze of light. Facing this light, so that every minute detail could be plainly seen, was a large unframed canvas, on which in colours the most vivid, was painted Lionel Dering's Dream.

The scene was Percy Osmond's bedroom, and the moment selected by the artist was the one when, after the brief struggle between Osmond and Kester, the latter has obtained possession of the dagger, and while pinning Osmond down with one knee and one arm, has, with his other hand, forced the dagger deep into his opponent's heart. Peeping from behind the curtains could be seen the white, terror-stricken face of Pierre Janvard. The figures were all life-size, and the likenesses takable.

Awe-struck they crowded round the folding doors, and gazed silently at the picture, forgetting for the moment that the man thus strangely accused was one of themselves.

"Now you see how the murder really happened—now you know who the murderer really was," said Lionel, speaking from some

place in the farther room where he could not be seen. "This is no dream but a most dread reality that you see pictured before you. I have proofs—ample proofs—of the truth of that which I now state. The murderer of Percy Osmond stands among you. Kester St. George is that man!"

At these words, every eye was turned instinctively on Kester. He was still standing at the table where he had put down his glass. His right hand was hidden in his waistcoat. With his left hand he supported himself against the table. A strange lividity had overspread his face; his lips twitched nervously. His frightened eyes wandered from one face to another of those who were now gazing on him. He tried to speak, but could not. Then his eyes fixed themselves on the brandy. Tom interpreted the look and poured some into a glass. He drank it greedily and then he spoke.

"What you have just been told," he said, "is nothing but a cruel, cowardly, devilish lie! Where is this man who accuses me?

Why does he hide himself? He hides himself because he is a liar—because he dare not face either you or me. We all know who was the murderer — we all know that Lionel Dering——"

"Lionel Dering is here to answer for himself. It is he who tells you to your face that you are the murderer of Percy Osmond!"

Yes, there, framed by the archway, full in the blaze of light, stood Lionel, no longer disguised—the dye washed off his face, his hands, his hair—the Lionel that they all remembered so well come back from the dead—his own dear self, and none but he, as they could all see at a glance, and yet looking strangely different without his long fair beard.

For a full minute Kester St. George stood as rigid as a statue, glaring across the room at the man whom he had so bitterly wronged.

One word his lips tried to form, but only half succeeded in doing so. That one word was *Forgive.* Then a strange spasm passed across his face; he pressed his hand to his

left side, and turning suddenly half round, fell back into the arms of the man nearest to him.

"He has fainted," said the General.

"He is dead," said Tom.

"Heaven knows, I had no thought or knowledge of this," said Lionel. "None whatever!"

CHAPTER XII.

GATHERED THREADS.

THE terribly sudden death of Kester St. George, left Lionel Dering with two courses to choose between. On the one hand he could carry out his original intention of going abroad, under an assumed name, leaving the world still to believe that he was dead. On the other hand, he could give himself up to justice, under his real name, and, his first trial never having been finished—take his stand at the bar again under the original charge, and with the proofs he had gathered in his possession, let his innocence of the crime imputed to him work itself out through a legitimate channel to a verdict of Not Guilty. This latter course was

the only one open to him if he wished to clear himself in the eyes of the world from the stain of blood, or even if he wished to assume his own name and his position as the owner of Park Newton. But did he really wish this thing? That idea of going abroad, of burying himself and his wife in some far-away nook of the New World, had taken such hold on his imagination, that even now it had by no means lost its sweetness in his thoughts. Then, again, Kester having died without a will, if he—Lionel—were to leave himself undeclared, the estate would go to General St. George, as next of kin, and after the old soldier's time it would go, in the natural course of events, to his brother Richard. Why, then, declare himself? why give himself into custody and undergo the pain and annoyance of another term of imprisonment, and another trial—and they would be both painful and annoying, even though his innocence were proved at the end of them? Why not rather bind over to silence those few trusted friends to whom his secret was already known, and going abroad

with Edith, spend the remainder of his days in happy obscurity. Why re-open that blood-stained page of family history, over which the world had of a surety gloated sufficiently already?

But in this latter view he was opposed by everybody except his wife; by his uncle, by Tom, by the vicar, and by nobody more strongly than by Messrs. Perrins and Hoskyns. The cry from all was—take your trial; let your innocence be proved, as proved it must be, and assume the name and position that are rightfully yours. Edith, with her head resting on his shoulder, only said: "Do that which seems best to you in your own heart, dearest, and that alone. Whether you go or stay, my place is by your side—my love unalterable. Only to be with you—never to lose you again—is all I ask. Give me that: I crave for nothing more."

Strange to say, the person who brought matters to a climax, and finally decided Lionel as to his future course of action, was the girl Nell, Mother Mim's plain-spoken grand-

daughter. Through some channel or other she had heard of the death of Mr. St. George, and one day she marched up the steps at Park Newton, and rang the big bell, and asked, as bold as brass, to see the General. The General was one of the most accessible of men, and when told that the girl wanted to see him privately, he marched off at once to the library, and ordered her to be admitted.

It was a strange story the girl had to tell —so strange that the General at first put her down as a common inpostor. Fortunately Mr. Perrins happened to be still at Park Newton, and he at once called the shrewd old lawyer to his assistance.

But Miss Nell was now taken with a stubborn fit, and refused either to say any more or to answer any more questions, till five pounds had been given her as an earnest of more to follow, in case her information should prove to be correct. The five pounds having been put into her hands, she told all that she knew freely enough, and answered every question that was put to her. Then she was dis-

missed for the time being, having first left an address where she might be found when wanted.

Nell had told them how the body of Dirty Jack had been found dead on the moor, and the first point to ascertain was, what had become of the confession which was known to have been in his possession when he left Mother Mim's cottage? Had it been found on his person? If so, where was it now? It was rather singular that Mr. St. George should be the last person known to have been seen in the company of Skeggs. The second question was, where was Mr. Bendall to be found? Mr. Perrins set to work without delay to solve this latter problem, by engaging one of Mr. Hoskyns's confidential clerks to make the requisite inquiries for him. To the first question, the whereabouts of the confession, he determined to give his own personal attention. But before he had an opportunity of doing this, he found among the papers of Kester the very document itself—the original confession, duly witnessed by Skeggs and the girl Nell. A day

or two later Mr. Bendall was also found, and —for a consideration—had no objection to tell all he knew of the affair. His evidence, and that given in the confession, tallied exactly. There could no longer be any moral doubt as to the fact of Kester St. George having been a son of Mother Mim.

This revelation was not without its effect on the question Lionel was still debating in his own mind. It armed his uncle and Tom with one weapon more in favour of the course they were desirous that he should pursue. If Kester St. George were not Lionel's cousin, if he were not related to the family in any way, there was less reason than ever why Lionel should not declare himself, why he should not give himself up, and let his own innocence be proved once and for ever, by proving the guilt of this other man.

Even Edith at last added her persuasions to those of his uncle and the others, and when this became the case Lionel could hold out no longer. Exactly a week after the death of Kester St. George (as we may as well continue

to call him,) Lionel Dering walked into the police-station at Duxley, and gave himself up into the hands of the sergeant on duty.

Mr. Drayton was astounded, as well he might be. "How can *you* be Mr. Dering?" he said. Lionel being now close-shaved, did not tally with the superintendent's recollection of him. "I saw that gentleman lying dead in his coffin in the church of San Michele, in Italy, and I could have sworn to him anywhere."

"What you saw, Mr. Drayton, was a cleverly-executed waxen effigy, and not the man himself. Me you did see and talk to, but without recognizing me. At all events here I am, alive and well, and if you will kindly lock me up, I shall esteem it a favour."

"I was never so sold in the whole course of my life," said Drayton. "But there's one comfort—Sergeant Whiffins was just as much sold as I was."

At the ensuing summer assizes Lionel Dering was again put on his trial for the murder of Percy Osmond. Janvard, whose

safety had been carefully looked after by a private detective in the guise of a guest at his hotel, was admitted as evidence for the Crown, and without leaving their box a verdict of Not Guilty was found by the jury. Never had such a scene been known in Duxley as was enacted that summer afternoon, when Lionel Dering walked down the steps of the Court-house a free man. A landau was in waiting, into which he was lifted by main force. No horses were needed, or would have been allowed. Relays of the crowd dragged the carriage all the way to Park Newton, in company with two brass bands, and all the flags that the town could muster. Lionel's arm had never ached so much as it did that evening, after he had shaken hands with a great multitude of his friends—and every man and boy prided himself upon being Mr. Dering's friend that day. As for the ladies, they had their own way of showing their sympathy with him. Half the children in the parish that came to light during the next twelve months were christened either Edith or Lionel.

The post-mortem examination showed that heart disease of long standing was the proximate cause of Kester St. George's death. He was buried not in the family vault where the St. Georges for two centuries lay in silent state, but in the town cemetery. The grave was marked by a plain slab, on which was engraved simply the initials of the name he had always been known by, and the date of his death.

"I warned him of it long ago," said Dr. Bolus to two or three fellows at Kester's old club, as he stood with his back to the fire and his coat tails thrown over his arms. "But whose warnings are sooner forgotten than a doctor's? By living away from London, and leading a perfectly quiet and temperate life, he might have been kept going for years. But, above all things, he should have avoided excitement of every kind."

Lionel and Edith put off for a little while their long-talked-of tour in order that they might be present at the wedding of Tom and Jane. The ceremony took place in August.

Tom and his bride went to Scotland for their honeymoon. Lionel and his wife started for Switzerland, en route for Italy, where they were to spend the ensuing winter.

Of late the Squire had recovered his health wonderfully. He seemed to have grown ten years younger in a few weeks. In the working of that wonderful coal-shaft, and in the prospect of his making a far larger fortune for his daughter than the one he so foolishly lost, he found a perpetual source of healthy excitement, which, by keeping both his mind and body actively and legitimately employed, had an undoubted tendency to lengthen his life. Besides this, Tom had asked him to superintend the construction of his new house. It was just the sort of job that the Squire delighted in—to look sharply after a lot of working men, and while pretending that they were all in a league to cheat him, blowing them up heartily all round one half-hour, and treating them to unlimited beer the next.

"I should like to see you in the Town

Council, Bristow," said the Squire one day to his son-in-law.

"Thank you, sir, all the same," said Tom, "but it's hardly good enough. There will be a general election before we are much older, when I mean, either by hook or by crook, to get into the House."

"Bristow, you have the cheek of the Deuce himself," was all that the astonished Squire could say.

It may just be remarked that Tom's ambition has since been gratified. He is now, and has been for some time, member for W——. He is clever, ambitious, and a tolerable orator, as oratory is reckoned now-a-days. What may not such a man aspire to?

Mr. Hoskyns is a frequent guest both of Tom and Lionel. Chatting with the former one day over the "walnuts and the wine," said the old man: "I have often puzzled my brain over that affair of Baldry's—that positive assertion of his that he saw and spoke to me one night in the Thornfield Road when I

was most certainly not there. Have you ever thought about it since?"

"Once or twice, I dare say, but I could have enlightened you at the time had I chosen to do so. It was I whom Baldry met. I had made myself up to resemble you, and previously to my visit to the prison in your character, I thought I would try the effect of my disguise upon somebody who had known you well for years. As it so happened, Baldry was the first of your acquaintances whom I encountered on my nocturnal ramble. The rest you know."

"You young vagabond! And yet you have the audacity to call yourself a respectable member of society. Perhaps you can explain the mystery of the ghostly footsteps at Park Newton when poor Pearce, the butler, was frightened out of the small quantity of wit that he could lay claim to?"

"That, too, I can explain. The ghostly footsteps, as it happened, were very corporeal footsteps, being those of none other than your humble servant."

"But how did you get into the room? It had been nailed up months before."

"The nailing up was more apparent than real. The nails were sham nails. The door could be unlocked at any time, and the room entered in the ordinary way."

"But how about the cough—Mr. Osmond's peculiar cough?"

"That was an imitation by me from lessons given me by Mr. Dering. It answered the purpose admirably for which it was intended."

"To hear such sounds at midnight in a room where a man had been murdered was enough to shake the strongest nerves. I wonder you were not frightened yourself to be in the room."

"That would have been ridiculous. There was nothing to be afraid of."

"In any extraordinary circumstances I shall never believe the evidence of my own senses again."

Mr. Cope was not long in perceiving that he had committed a grave error of judgment in refusing Mr. Culpepper the assistance he

had asked for. There would be a splendid fortune for Jane after all. It was enough to make a man tear his hair with vexation—only Mr. Cope hadn't much hair to tear—to think what a golden chance he had let slip through his fingers. Edward was recalled at once on the slight chance that if a meeting could anyhow be brought about between him and Jane, the old flame might spring up with renewed ardour in the young lady's bosom, in which case she might insist upon her engagement with Edward being carried out. But Edward bore his disappointment very philosophically, and had not been three hours in Duxley before he found himself eating pastry, and being ministered to by Miss Moggs, who was still unmarried, and still as plump and smiling as ever.

Three weeks later the good people of Duxley were treated to a delightful sensation. Mr. Cope, Junior, had run away with the daughter of Mr. Moggs, the confectioner, and Mr. Cope, Senior, had threatened to cut his son off with the well-known metaphorical shilling.

The latest news of young Mr. Cope is, that he is living in furnished apartments in a cheap suburb of London. The late Miss Moggs, her plumpness notwithstanding, has developed into a Tartar. They have six children. Mr. Cope's income is exactly two hundred a-year, left him by his mother. His father will not give him a penny, and he is either too lazy, or too incompetent, to attempt to add to his means by a little honest work. He is very stout and very short of breath. When he has any money he spends his time in a neighbouring billiard-room, smoking a short pipe and drinking half-and-half, and watching other men play. When he has no money he stops at home and rocks the cradle, and listens to his wife's reproaches. Mrs. Cope vows that she will buy a mangle and make her husband turn it, and try whether she cannot shame him into work that way. And all this is the result of eating pastry and being waited upon by a pretty girl.

After the trial was over, Nell, by means of some speciously-concocted tale, contrived to

cozen General St. George out of twenty pounds. With this she disappeared, and was never either seen or heard of in Duxley or its neighbourhood again.

During the time that Lionel and his wife were abroad the General went with his friend, Major Beauchamp, to Madeira, and wintered there.

It had been Lionel's intention to stay abroad for about three years. But as it fell out, he and Edith were back at Park Newton by the end of twelve months, being brought thither by the expectation of an all-important event. Lionel has not since then left home for more than a month at a time. So full of painful memories was Park Newton to him, that it was only by Edith's persuasion that he was induced to settle there at all. But years have come and gone since then, and nothing would now induce him to live anywhere else. Whatever gloomy associations might otherwise have clung to the old house have been exorcised long ago by the merry laughter of children. It was difficult at first

for the Echoes of that murder-haunted roof to bring themselves to mimic the soft syllables of childhood, but when one little stranger after another came to teach them, then their voices, rusty and creaky at first through long disuse, gradually won back to themselves a long-forgotten sweetness; and now the Echoes follow the children wherever they go, and all the grim old pile is musical with the laughter and songs and free joyous shouts of childhood. Many a time they have a bout together—the children and the Echoes—trying which of them can make the more noise; and then the children call to the Echoes and bid them come out of their hiding-places and show themselves in the dusky twilight; but the Echoes only laugh back their answer, and are ever too timid to let themselves be seen.

Who, of all people in the world, should be the children's primest favourite and slave but General St. George? His heart is in the nursery, and there he spends hours every day. He "keeps shop" with them, he plays at soldiers with them, he is their horse, their

roaring lion, their wild man of the woods. It is certainly amusing to see the old warrior, whose very name was once a word of terror among the lawless hill-tribes of the far East —to see him led about by one boy by means of a piece of string tied round his arm, and while another youthful scapegrace deafens you with the noise of a drum, to watch him imitate, with dangling paws, the uncouth gracefulness of a dancing bear. There can be no doubt on one point—that the old soldier enjoys himself quite as much as the children do.

After his year's imprisonment was at an end —to which mitigated punishment Janvard was condemned, in consideration of his having acted as witness for the Crown—he and his sister went over to Switzerland, and opened an hotel there at one of the chief centres of tourist travel. There, not long ago, he was encountered by Lionel. Smirking, bowing, and rubbing his hands, Janvard went up to him, with a request that Monsieur Dering would do him the honour of stopping at his

hotel. But Lionel would have nothing to do with him, and when Janvard could be made to comprehend this, his face became a study of mortification and surprise. His feelings, such as they were, were evidently hurt. He never could be made to understand why Monsieur Dering had refused so positively to take up his quarters at the Lion d'Or.

In a world that is full of permutation and change, there are happily a few things that change not. One of these is the friendship between Lionel and Tom, which neither time nor absence, nor the growth of other interests has power to alter in the least. When they both happen to be in Midlandshire at the same time, a week never passes without their seeing more or less of each other, and between their wives there is almost as firm a friendship as there is between themselves. Four people more united, more happy in each other's society, it would be impossible to find.

It was only last summer, during the long spell of hot weather, that Edith and Jane, with their youngsters, went over to Gatehouse

Farm together, for the sake of the fresh sea breezes that seem to blow perpetually round the old house. They were sitting one day on the broad yellow sands, idling through the glowing afternoon, with their embroidery and a novel, when one of Jane's little girls happened to fall and hurt her finger. She began to cry, and Edith's little boy was by her side in a moment.

"Don't cry," he said, as he stooped and kissed her. "I will marry oo when I grow to be a big man."

The little girl's tears at once ceased to flow.

The two ladies looked up. Their eyes met, and they both smiled.

"Such a thing is by no means improbable," said Edith.

"I shall not be a bit surprised if it really comes to pass," replied Jane.

THE END.

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